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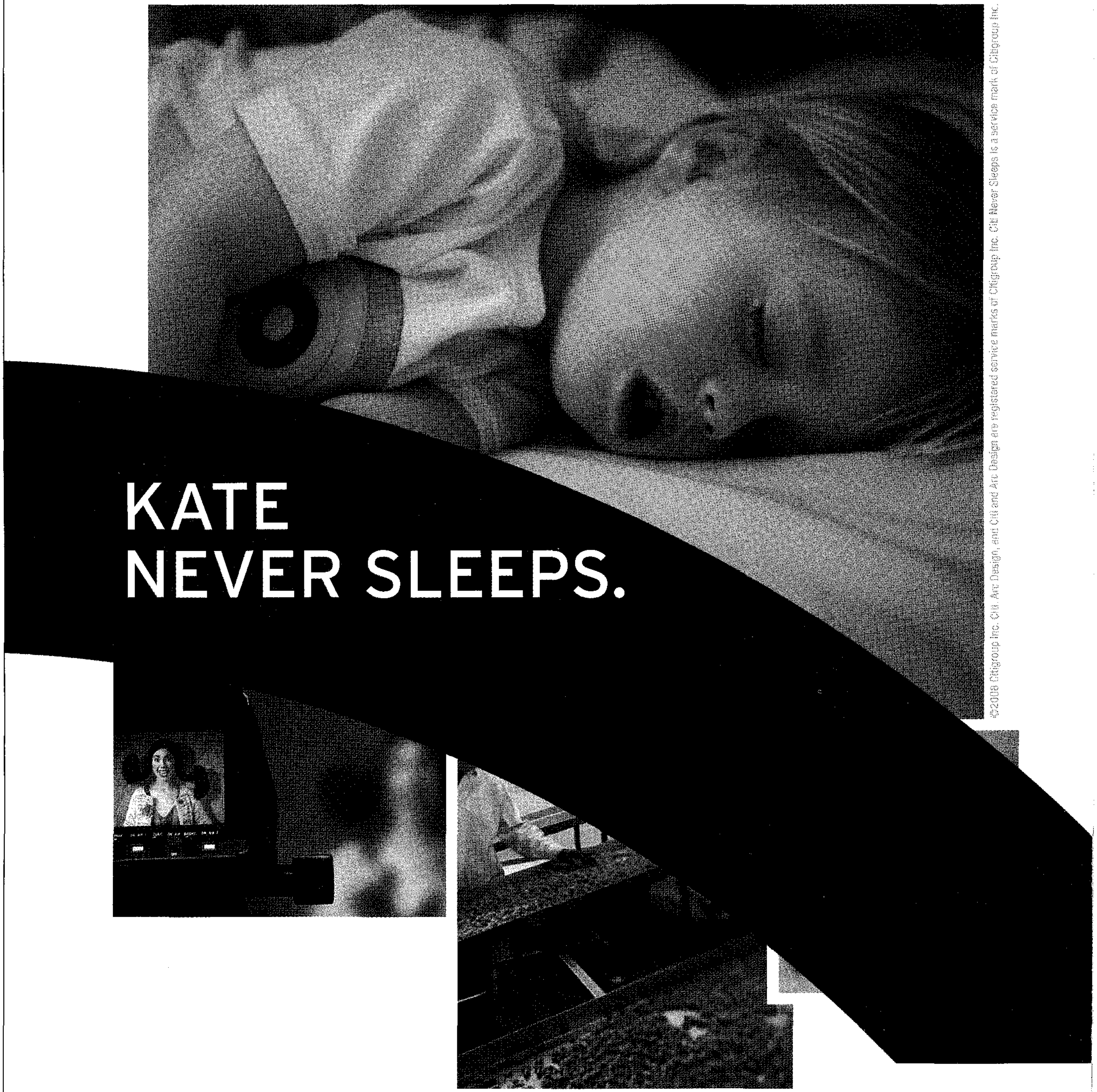
THE NEW YORKER

DEC. 22 & 29, 2008


KATE
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Dreams.

After an evening of tantrums that shook the walls, Kate has finally begun to dream. But down the hall, her father wonders how he'll afford to send her to college, while her mother considers a larger home. Downtown, Kate's overworked pediatrician ponders an early retirement. In Bentonville, a shipment of Kate's favorite peas arrives at the baby food bottling plant. And in Sydney, a sing-along DVD is being filmed, one that'll provide Kate's grateful parents with a brand-new lullaby.

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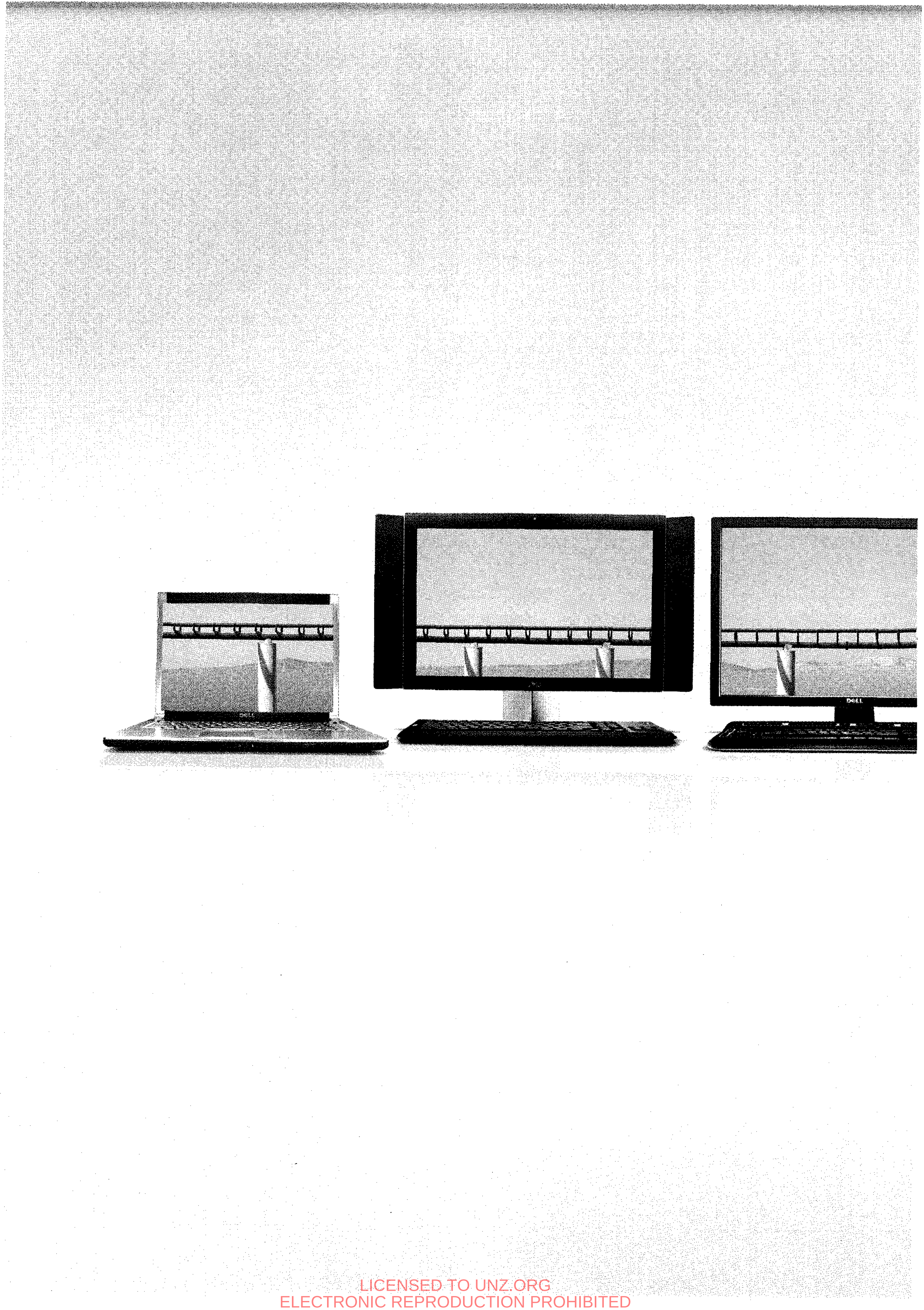

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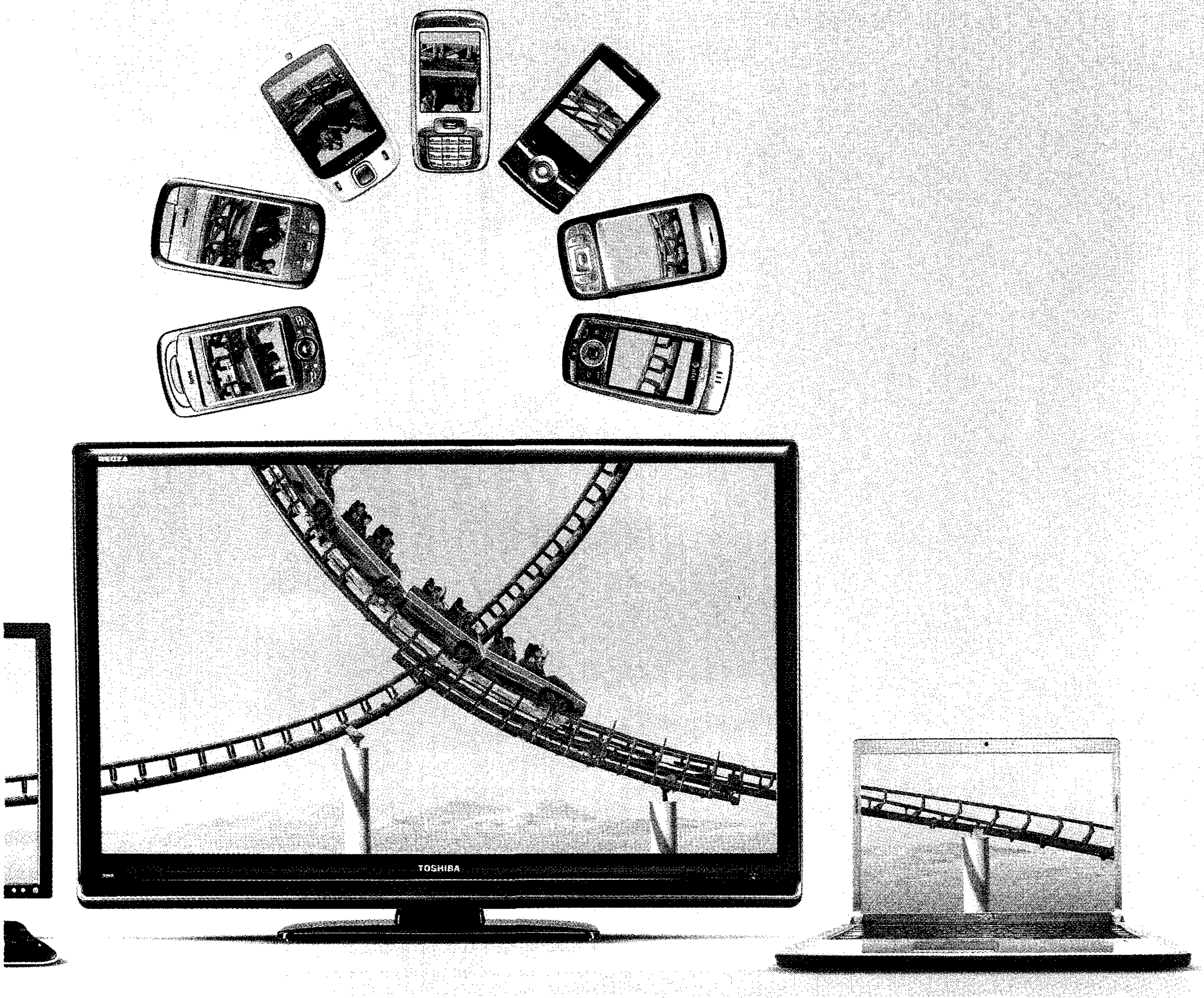

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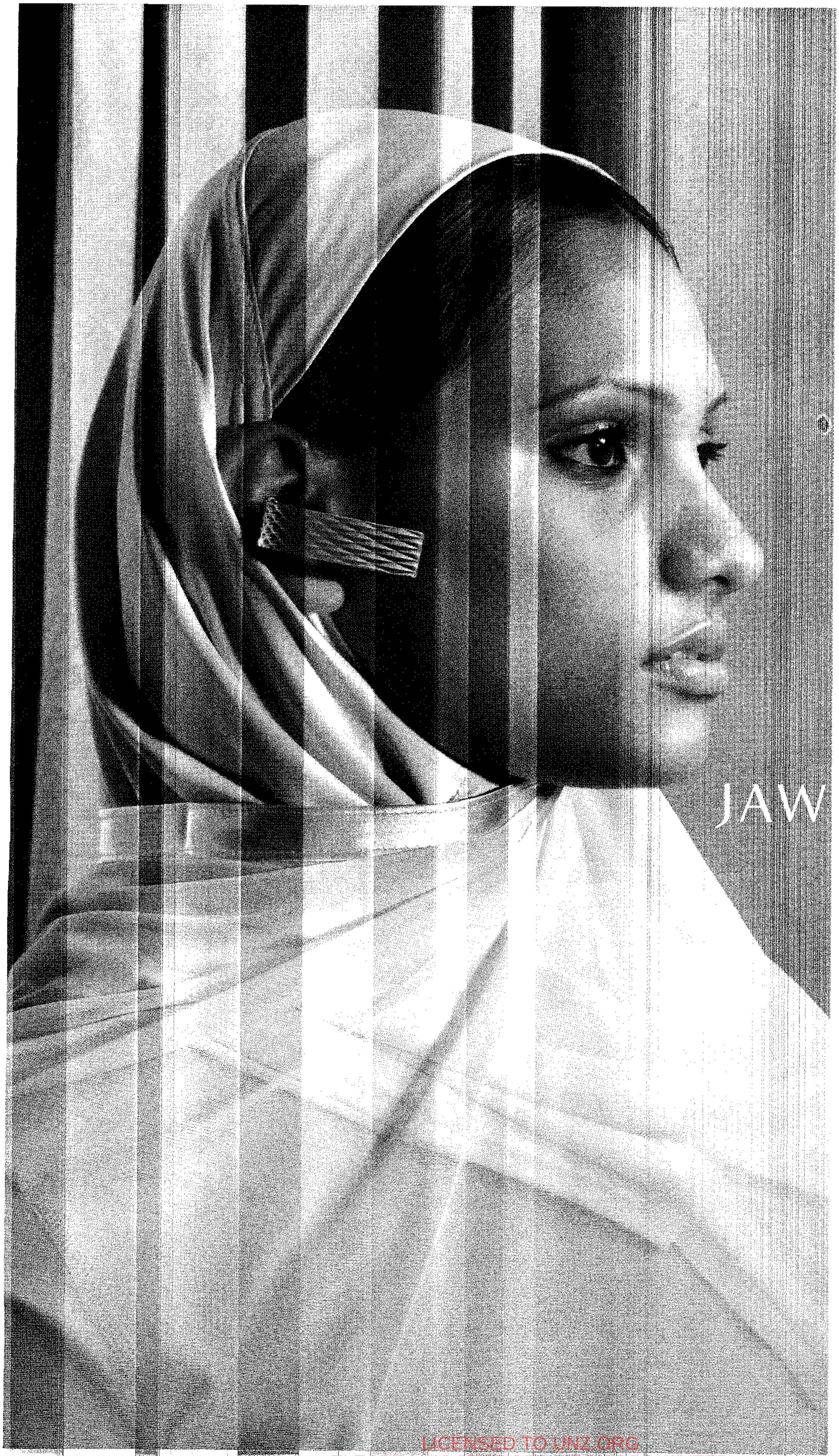
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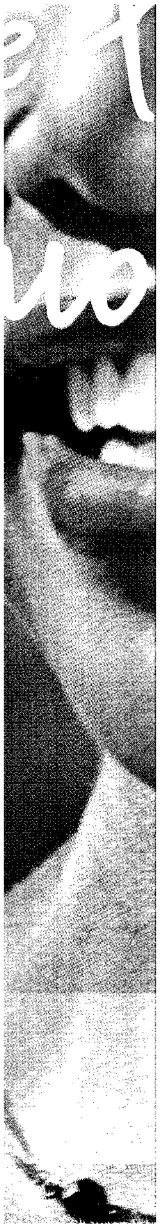

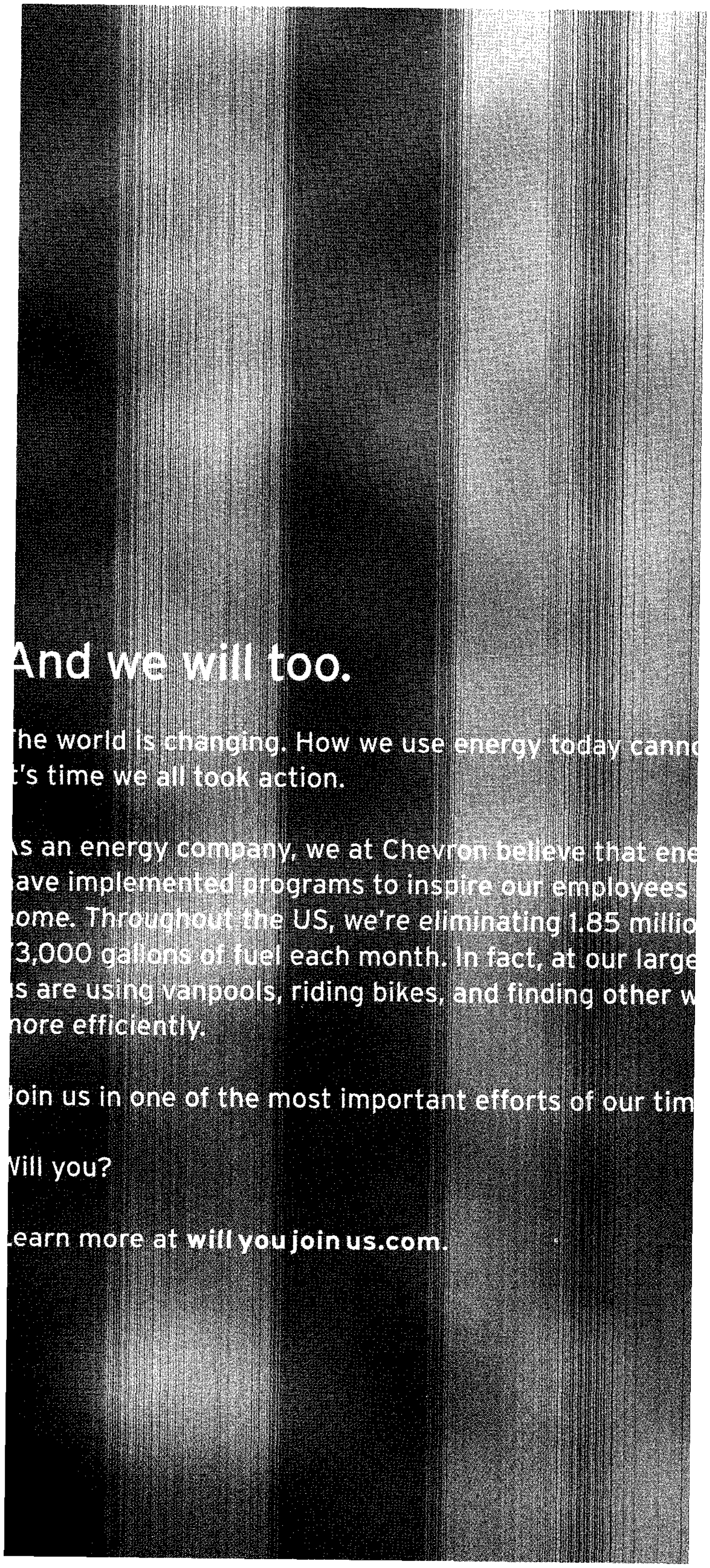

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THE NEW YORKER
WINTER FICTION ISSUE

DECEMBER 22 & 29, 2008

16 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN
41 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Hendrik Hertzberg on Senate-seat follies;
James Surowiecki on the newspaper crash.

Mark Twain 50 AMERICAN NOTES
The Privilege of the Grave
Donald Antrim 52 FICTION
"Another Manhattan"
Dana Goodyear 62 LETTER FROM JAPAN
I ♥ Novels
Cellular-age literature.
Alice Munro 69 FICTION
"Some Women"
Roberto Bolaño 78 FICTION
"Meeting with Enrique Lihn"
Zadie Smith 82 PERSONAL HISTORY
Dead Man Laughing
The things a family found funny.
Colson Whitehead 90 FICTION
"The Gangsters"

THE CRITICS
BOOKS
Darryl Pinckney 104 *Susan Sontag's early journals.*
109 Briefly Noted
Nancy Franklin 110 ON TELEVISION
Talk shows with Elvis Costello and William Shatner.
Peter Schjeldahl 112 THE ART WORLD
Marlene Dumas at MOMA.
John Lahr 114 THE THEATRE
"Liza's at the Palace," "Prayer for My Enemy."
David Denby 116 THE CURRENT CINEMA
"Revolutionary Road," "Gran Torino," "The Class."

POEMS
Dan Chiasson 57 "Thread"
Arthur Vogelsang 76 "The Fifth Season"
Roger Angell 89 "Greetings, Friends!"

COVER *"Minimalist Christmas," by Bob Staake* DRAWINGS *Victoria Roberts, Mick Stevens, David Sipress, Leo Cullum, Zachary Kanin, Sean O'Neill, Alex Gregory, P. C. Vey, Frank Cotham, Danny Shanahan, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Roz Chast, Barbara Smaller, Carolita Johnson, Pat Byrnes* SPOTS *Titus Neijens*

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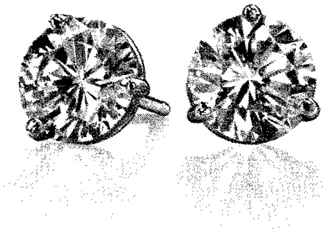

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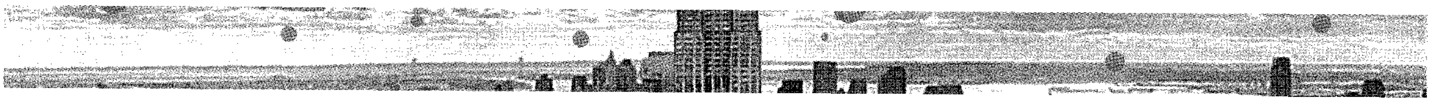

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Donald Antrim ("Another Manhattan," p. 52) has written three novels and a memoir, "The Afterlife."

Hendrik Hertzberg (Comment, p. 41), the author of "Politics: Observations & Arguments," writes frequently about politics and policy. He also has a blog on newyorker.com.

Mark Twain ("The Privilege of the Grave," p. 50) died in 1910. "Who Is Mark Twain?," a collection of previously unpublished writing, comes out in April. He wrote this piece in 1905.

Dan Chiasson (Poem, p. 57) is a poet and literary critic who teaches at Wellesley College. A collection of his essays, "One Kind of Everything: Poem and Person in Contemporary America," came out last year.

Dana Goodyear ("I ♥ Novels," p. 62) is a staff writer. Her book of poems, "Honey and Junk," is out in paperback.

Roberto Bolaño ("Meeting with Enrique Lihn," p. 78), a Chilean novelist and poet, died in 2003. A translation of his novel "2666" came out last month.

Roger Angell (Poem, p. 89) has written seven books on baseball, including "Game Time."

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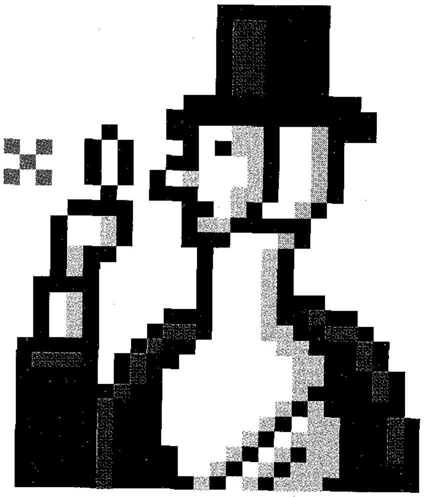
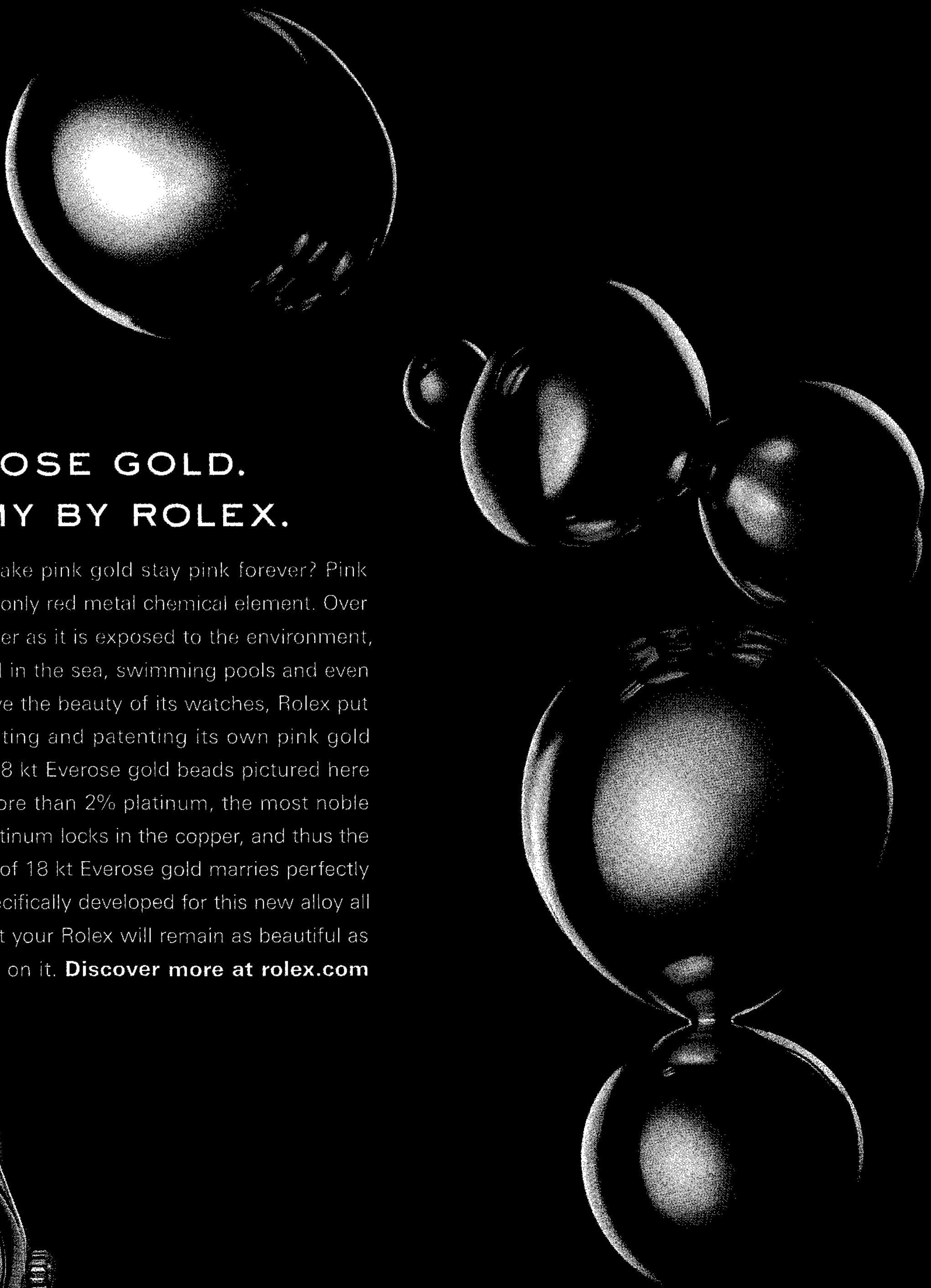
David Denby (The Current Cinema, p. 116), a film critic for the magazine, has a new book, "Snark," which will be published in January.

Bob Staake (Cover) has written and illustrated several children's books, including "The Donut Chef."

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

Audio: *Zadie Smith* talks about comedy and her brother's standup act. / *Roddy Doyle* reads "Christmas Eve," by Maeve Brennan, on the fiction podcast. / A Q. & A. with *Colson Whitehead.* / The magazine's fiction editor, *Deborah Treisman*, takes readers' questions. / *David Denby, Nancy Franklin, John Lahr, Peter Schjeldahl*, and the rest of the critics list their favorites of 2008. / Blog posts by *Roger Angell, Hendrik Hertzberg, James Surowiecki*, and others, plus the Book Bench, the Cartoon Lounge, and Goings On. / Animated cartoons and the caption contest. / A complete archive of every issue, back to 1925.





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EATING ECONOMICS

James Surowiecki looks at world food markets and sees "the perils of efficiency" (The Financial Page, November 24th). He and others judge that, since we were burned by financial deregulation, we should oppose liberalization in food markets as well. Economists who study food policy are familiar with this and other common misperceptions: everyone eats, so everyone's an expert. But the mechanisms behind food prices are full of surprises. It turns out that the world food crisis of 2007-08 was caused mainly by America's loose dollars and by the surging demand for biofuels, and was worsened by export restrictions in several surplus countries as well as by low grain stocks, especially in East Asia. The gradual liberalization of food markets in earlier decades, whether in rich or poor countries, was not part of the problem. If anything, trade liberalization, by helping to cushion the shock, was part of the solution. There are many things that governments can do to improve food markets, but pursuing national self-sufficiency is rarely one of them. Countless studies from around the world demonstrate these effects, including a dozen papers on the food crisis published this month in a special issue of the scholarly journal *Agricultural Economics.*

William A. Masters
Professor of Agricultural Economics
Purdue University
West Lafayette, Ind.

TO OUR CREDIT

John Cassidy, in describing congressional criticism of Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson and Federal Reserve chairman Ben Bernanke, writes that their "efforts to prop up the financial system have so far had little effect on the housing slump, which is the source of the trouble" ("Anatomy of a Meltdown," December 1st). As someone who has watched housing prices in the Bay Area inflate at rates grossly disproportionate to historical norms, I would suggest that the real sources of the trouble include the federal government's lack of regulation (e.g., unregulated derivatives, such as credit-default swaps), cheap money (i.e., low interest rates), a mortgage industry that positively monetized shaky and liar loans, and a lending industry that encouraged mortgagors to spend their phantom equity on disposable goods. Declining housing prices are a symptom of systemic problems in our economy, and it's these systemic issues that are the root cause of the current economic fiasco.

Devin Leaf
Oakland, Calif.

Bernanke may be reluctant to use the power of the Federal Reserve against hard-to-identify bubbles, but the government has used a broader strategy to effectively deal with them: by spending when the economy was down, and taxing when it was overheated. This is called "negative feedback," and it is a classic engineering approach. In the years after the Second World War, this strategy helped keep us out of a cycle of boom and bust, and instead gave us steady, moderate growth. It's probably time to stop betting on booms and bubbles and go back to the safer strategy of dampening them all.

David Collier-Brown
Willowdale, Ontario

Cassidy's piece reminded me of the sage Vemana, who wrote in a poem, in Telugu, several hundred years ago, "After lending money to an uncreditworthy man, it is foolish to tag him and expect him to return the lent money. It is like expecting your chicken to respond to your call after it was eaten by a cat."

B. A. Ramam
Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh, India

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"Slava's Snowshow on Broadway," at the Helen Hayes. Photograph by Gus Powell.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

THIS WEEK

NIGHT LIFE
DON'T WALK ON BY

The Loser's Lounge tribute shows are put on by a rotating cast of downtown musicians, led by the keyboardist Joe McGinty, and they are always irreverent, entertaining, and informative. Past targets have included Neil Diamond, the Beach Boys, Paul Williams, and Queen. The revue celebrates its fifteenth anniversary with a show at Joe's Pub that honors Burt Bacharach, the first artist they ever respectfully skewered. (See page 20.)

ART
THE LIGHT STUFF

The Jewish Museum's biennial Hanukkah Project goes synesthetic this year with Julianne Swartz's "The Sound of Light." The sculptural installation has an audio component, which guides visitors through the museum's permanent exhibition "Culture and Continuity: The Jewish Journey." (See page 22.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
HALLELUJAH!

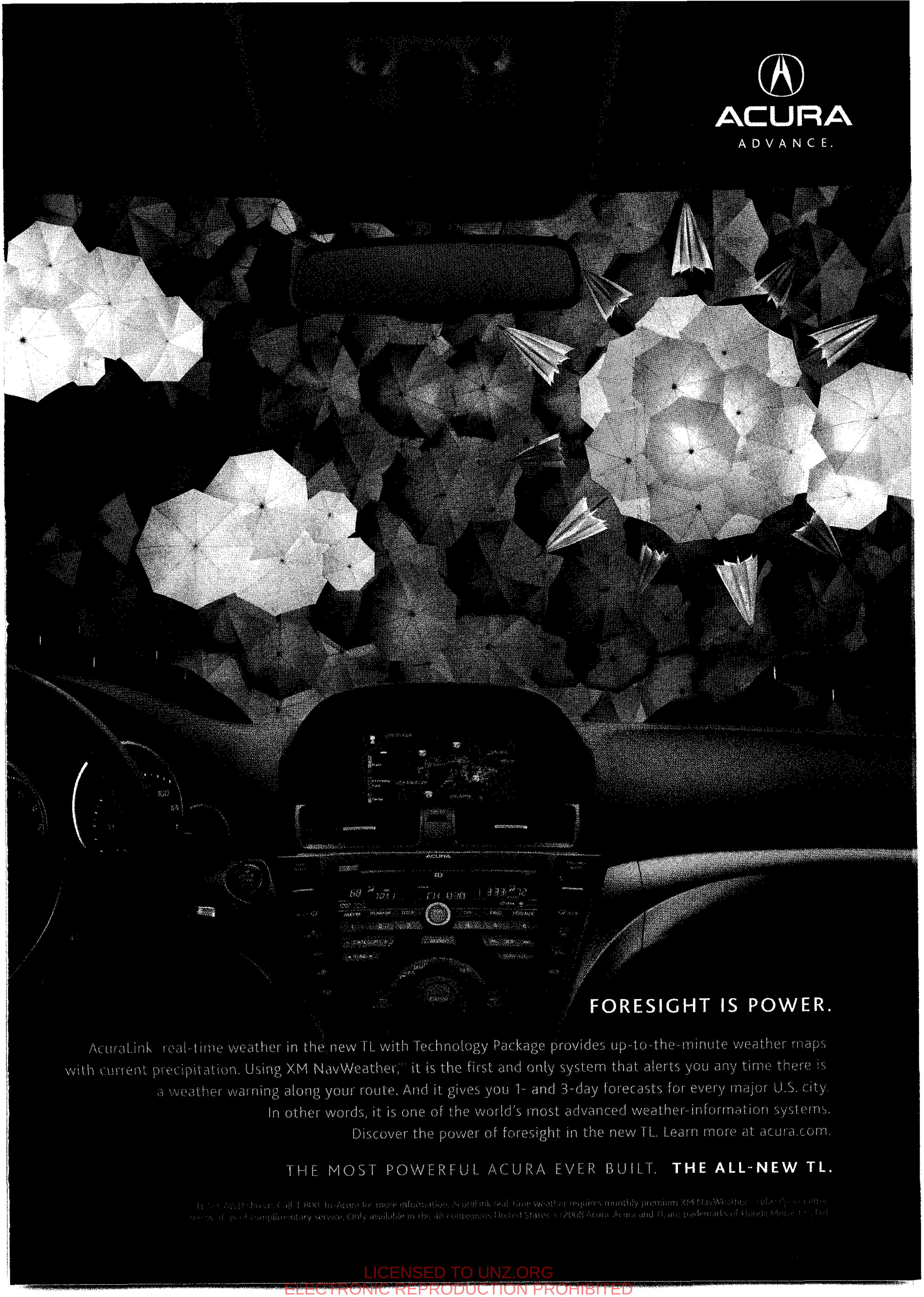
Performances of Handel's "Messiah" will be abundant over the next two weeks, including offerings from the New York Philharmonic (featuring the countertenor Andreas Scholl and the conductor Ton Koopman) and from Musica Sacra. (See pages 26 and 28.)

MOVIES
THUMBSUCKER

In December, 1956, Francis Cardinal Spellman inveighed, from the pulpit of St. Patrick's Cathedral, against Elia Kazan's "Baby Doll"—starring Carroll Baker as a thumb-sucking teen-age bride—as well as against any, from among his flock, who would dare to see it. The Catholic boycott went national and the film was pulled from most theatres, becoming both a flop and a cause célèbre. Film Forum will show the film, and Baker and her co-star Eli Wallach will be on hand to discuss it. (See page 34.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND
ZANE-Y TIMES

The holidays may be for children, but there's one event that adults can enjoy as well: the seasonal show put on by the rocker turned kids' musician Dan Zanes, at the New Victory Theatre. (See page 36.)



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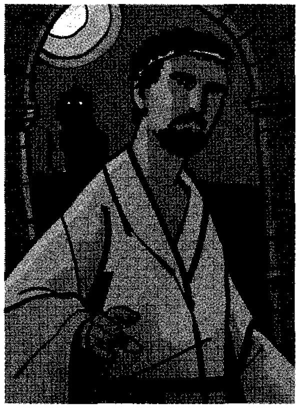
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
DANIEL AND NOAH

The unlikely hit of the 1958 theatre season was a twelfth-century sacred drama called "The Play of Daniel," a retelling of Daniel's adventures in the lions' den and at the court of Darius. The early-music pioneer Noah Greenberg and his group New York Pro Musica presented the piece at the Cloisters, with sets by Lincoln Kirstein and a verse narration by W. H. Auden ("Welcome, good people / Watch and listen"). With its pealing trumpets, florid recitatives, and thundering marches, the production may have little resembled what medieval people actually saw, but it was nonetheless a vibrant, haunting show. "Nothing so fine as this has been done in New York in recent memory," Brooks Atkinson wrote in the *Times*. Fifty years on, Gotham Early Music Scene presents a fresh staging of "Daniel," at the Cloisters Dec. 20-21, directed by Drew Minter. Adventurous kids may be as entranced as adults; I saw a version when I was little, and thrilled to the sight of a disembodied hand writing on the wall.

—*Alex Ross*



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THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

BECKY SHAW
Peter DuBois directs Gina Gionfriddo's comedy, about a newlywed couple who fix up two friends. In previews. (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

THE CRIPPLE OF INISHMAAN
Garry Hynes directs Martin McDonagh's play, set in 1934, about a crippled orphan living in an Irish town, who becomes enthralled with a film crew that arrives to make a movie. An Atlantic Theatre Company co-production with Galway's Druid Theatre. In previews. Opens Dec. 21. (336 W. 20th St. 212-279-4200.)

A LIGHT LUNCH
At the Flea, the world première of a play by A. R. Gurney, about the meeting of a Texas politician and a literary agent. In previews. Opens Dec. 19. (41 White St. 212-352-3101.)

PAL JOEY
At Studio 54, Roundabout Theatre Company presents the Rodgers and Hart musical from 1940, with a book adaptation by Richard Greenberg. Joe Mantello directs a cast that includes Martha Plimpton and Stockard Channing. In previews. Opens Dec. 18. (254 W. 54th St. 212-719-1300.)

NOW PLAYING

BEASLEY'S CHRISTMAS PARTY
The Keen Company presents Booth Tarkington's comedy, directed by Carl Forsman. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

BILLY ELLIOT THE MUSICAL
Fans of Lee Hall and Stephen Daldry's 2000 movie, set in northern England in the mid-nineteen-eighties, about a boy who quits boxing to take up ballet, may notice that Daldry's musical adaptation, with songs by Elton John, lacks a few of the film's charms—nuanced characters, the memorable final scene, T. Rex. But it does have a satisfying combination of hardscrabble wit and populist brio that's especially exciting to see on Broadway. Three boys alternate in the title role; in a recent performance, Kiril Kulish danced thrillingly as Billy, and David Bologna was terrific as his cross-dressing friend, Michael. The show ably demonstrates dance's power to free the soul and inspire the crowd; in one of the best numbers, bobbies, striking miners, little girls in tutus, Billy, and his teacher dance together, belting out the words "solidarity forever." (Imperial, 240 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE BLACK MONK
A "chamber musical" by Wendy Kesselman, directed by Kevin Newbury, adapted from Chekhov's short story about the lure of madness. In the original tale, a tormented young man hallucinates a floating monk, who convinces him, to his detriment, that he is a genius in the making. In Kesselman's version, he's more like an ingénue with an imaginary friend. Kesselman sets aside Chekhov's philosophical concerns—does greatness necessitate madness? Is inspiration worth the price of sanity?—in favor of lovers' ballads and period-friendly histrionics. Thankfully, the monk is played by the veteran character actor Austin Pendleton, who, smiling impishly, manages to add some life to the stilted proceedings. (Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

CHAIR
Theatre for a New Audience presents a play by Edward Bond, an allegory about oppressive government security, directed by Robert Woodruff. (The Duke on 42nd Street, 229 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010. Through Dec. 28.)

A CHILD'S CHRISTMAS IN WALES
Charlotte Moore directs this stage adaptation of Dylan Thomas's classic story, at the Irish Rep. (132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

DANCE DANCE REVOLUTION
Les Freres Corbusier ("Hell House," "A Very Merry Unauthorized Children's Scientology Pageant") offer the première of their latest show, directed by Alex Timbers, with original songs by Gary Adler ("Altar Boyz"), about a dance prophet named Moonbeam Funk who saves the day in a society where dancing is illegal. (Ohio, 66 Wooster St. 212-868-4444. Through Dec. 20.)

GANG OF SEVEN
In Jim Neu's bizarre but intriguing new comedy about focus groups, seven strangers recount, in flurries of jargon-like language, the story of how they came together under the guise of market research, and then pseudo-philosophize at length about belonging, anonymity, and community. But when two of the members are mysteriously struck by a bolt of individualism, things begin to fall apart. Or do they? Neu, who has worked extensively with Robert Wilson in the past, has crafted a deceptively creaky meditation on the contemporary entanglement of reality, identity, and the marketplace. The show itself reflects this entanglement when the play, in a genuinely surprising metatheatrical turn, is revealed to be more than you bargained for. (La Mama, 74A E. 4th St. 212-475-7710. Through Dec. 21.)

HOME
Three actors perform twenty-five roles in Samm-Art Williams's 1980 play. Set in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, it tells the story of a man who leaves his family in North Carolina and heads for New York City. (Signature Theatre Company, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

IRVING BERLIN'S WHITE CHRISTMAS
Walter Bobbie has done a fine job staging this adaptation of the 1954 movie, which bequeathed us such songs as "Sisters" and "Count Your Blessings Instead of Sheep." A pair of vaudeville performers (Stephen Bogardus and Jeffry Denman, standing in for Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye) join a pair of dames (Kerry O'Malley and Meredith Patterson) and put on a big show in a cozy Vermont inn. The sets, the costumes, the dreaded Christmas cheer—it's all done with class, commitment, and the tiniest degree of self-awareness; your saccharine meter may not go off once. The cast is better than it needs to be, and the snow, when it comes, is like manna from the god of schmalz. (Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 212-307-4100.)

LIZA'S AT THE PALACE
Liza Minnelli returns to Broadway with a show of song and dance. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 212-307-4100.)

LONDON CRIES
At night, when the well-to-do of Victorian London are asleep in their beds, the ghosts of the destitute come to the Old Vic Theatre to entertain one another with amusing show tunes about their dismal, now-long-gone lives. This small musical—adapted (from Henry Mayhew's book "London Labour and the London Poor") and directed by Di Trevis at the Irondale Center before heading to the real Old Vic, in London—would benefit from a plot, a little more dancing, and a glimpse of genuine pain and suffering, to break up the monotony of its many autobiographical monologues. Still, some of the music is strong and catchy, the motley cast, with its less-than-perfect voices and bad accents, is charming, and the set—a huge, spare room in an old Brooklyn church—is grand in an aptly shabby way. (85 S. Oxford St., Brooklyn. 212-352-3101. Through Dec. 20.)

NATHAN THE WISE
Richard Sewell adapts the Gotthold Lessing dramatic poem, about a Jewish merchant in Muslim Jerusalem during the Christian Crusades. Melissa Maxwell directs. (Pearl, 80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.)

PRAYER FOR MY ENEMY
Playwrights Horizons presents the New York première of a play by Craig Lucas ("Prelude to a Kiss"), directed by Bartlett Sher, about an Iraq-war soldier and his alcoholic father, who is a Vietnam vet. Starring Victoria Clark, Michele Pawk,

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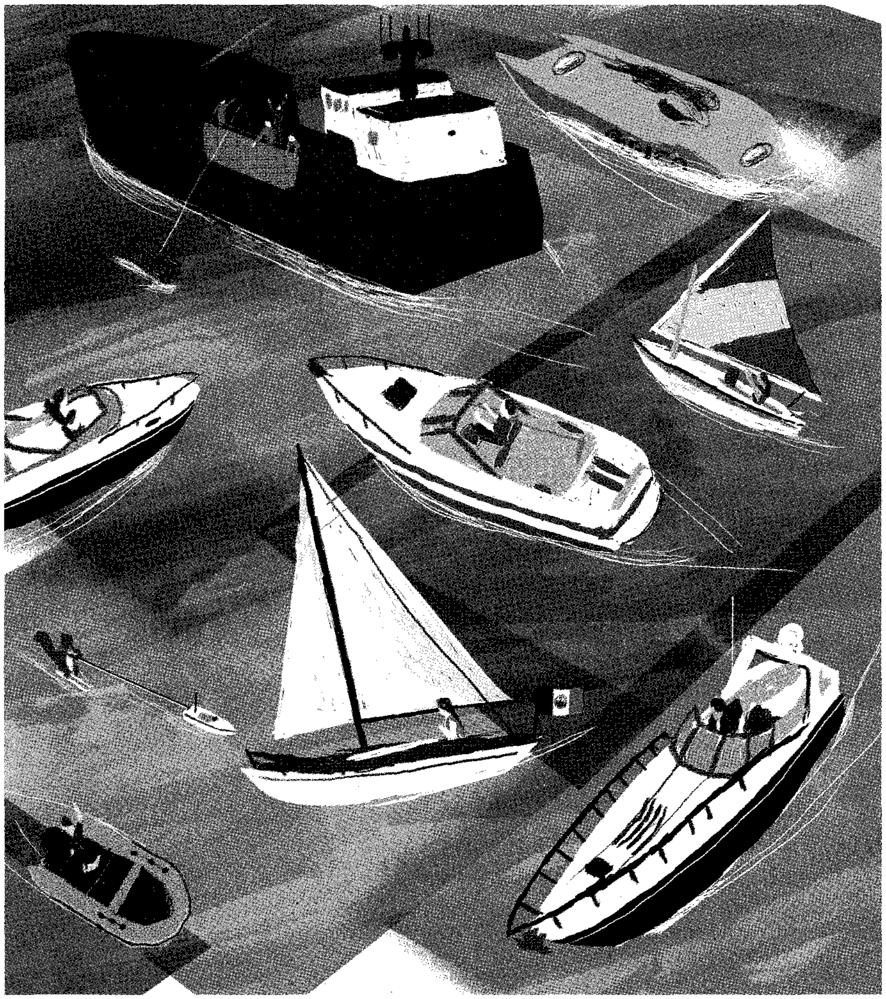
and Jonathan Groff. (Reviewed in this issue.) (416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Through Dec. 21.)

SHREK THE MUSICAL

DreamWorks Theatricals presents the musical adaptation of the film, with a book and lyrics by David Lindsay-Abaire ("Rabbit Hole") and music by Jeanine Tesori ("Caroline, or Change"). Jason Moore ("Avenue Q") directs; Brian d'Arcy James and Sutton Foster star. (Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St. 212-239-6200.)

SLAVA'S SNOWSHOW ON BROADWAY

As a child in Russia, Slava Polunin made miniature towns out of snow and dreamed of becoming Charlie Chaplin. Now he creates a nightly blizzard, in the Broadway transfer of his touring children's show. Polunin presides over a cadre of clowns in floppy hats and shoes, who wear blank expressions as they climb through the audience, spilling water on spectators' heads. A giddy, plotless exercise in havoc, the show alternates between charming if forgettable physical-comedy bits and knock-'em-sock-'em stage effects, such as a giant cobweb-like sheet that envelops the audience. But it's the final few minutes that truly astonish: a storm of paper blasts through the theatre, topped off by a fusillade of jumbo balloon balls. (Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)



The New York National Boat Show sails into the Javits Center.

TOO MUCH MEMORY

To keep order in his country in turmoil, the pigheaded king of Thebes, Creon (Peter Jay Fernandez), makes the arbitrary law that anyone caught trying to bury the body of the traitor Polynices will be put to death. Polynices' sister Antigone (Laura Heisler), full of passionate intensity and no common sense, thinks that Creon's law is unjust, and is willing to die for that belief. In Keith Reddin and Meg Gibson's modern-day adaptation of Sophocles' eponymous tragedy, Antigone is such a selfish, tiresome brat that one feels more sympathy for Creon. Reddin and Gibson may have intended that, but they couldn't have intended the hour-long show to feel like forever on account of it. (Fourth Street Theatre, 83 E. 4th St. 212-868-4444. Through Dec. 22.)

WOMEN BEWARE WOMEN

Red Bull Theatre revives Thomas Middleton's Jacobean satire of sixteenth-century sexual politics in England and Italy. (Theatre at St. Clement's, 423 W. 46th St. 212-352-3101.)

Also Playing

ALL MY SONS: Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **ARIAS WITH A TWIST:** HERE Arts Center, 145 Sixth Ave., near Spring St. 212-352-3101. **THE ATHEIST:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-352-3101. **AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY:** Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **AVENUE Q:** Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **BACK BACK BACK:** Manhattan Theatre Club, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. **BLACK WATCH:** St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water St., Brooklyn. 718-254-8779. Through Dec. 21. **BLASTED:** SoHo Rep, 46 Walker St. 212-352-3101. Through Dec. 21. **BOEING-BOEING:** Longacre, 220 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **DIVIDING THE ESTATE:** Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **EQUUS:** Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS:** Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane. 212-307-4100. **GYPSY:** St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **HAIRSPRAY:** Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 212-307-4100. **HILLARY: A MODERN GREEK TRAGEDY WITH A (SOMEWHAT) HAPPY ENDING:** Living Theatre, 21 Clinton St. 212-868-4444. Through Dec. 20. **IN THE HEIGHTS:** Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 212-239-6200. **JERSEY BOYS:** August Wilson, 245 W. 52nd St. 212-239-6200. **THE LION KING:** Minskoff, 200 W. 45th St. 212-307-4747. **THE LITTLE MERMAID:** Lunt-Fontanne, 205 W. 46th St. 212-307-4747. **MAMMA MIA!:** Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 212-239-6200. **MARY POPPINS:** New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4747. **MONTY PYTHON'S SPAMALOT:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **ROAD SHOW:** Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Through Dec. 28. **SATURN RETURNS:** Mitzi E. Newhouse, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200. **THE SEAGULL:** Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. Through Dec. 21. **SLEEPWALK WITH ME:** Bleecker Street Theatre, 45 Bleecker St. 212-239-6200. **SOUTH PACIFIC:** Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200. **SPEED-THE-PLOW:** Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. **SPRING AWAKENING:** Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200. **STREAMERS:** Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. **TAKING OVER:** Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Through Dec. 21. **13:** Bernard B. Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **THE 39 STEPS:** Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. **WHAT'S THAT SMELL: THE MUSIC OF JACOB STERLING:** New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200. Through Dec. 28. **WICKED:** Gershwin, 222 W. 51st St. 212-307-4100.

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

APOLLO THEATRE

253 W. 125th St. (212-307-4100)—Dec. 19: The return of the seventies disco queens **Labelle.**

BLENDER THEATRE AT GRAMERCY

127 E. 23rd St. (212-307-7171)—Dec. 26-27: **Todd Rundgren** returns to the pump-your-fist rock of the late seventies and early eighties on his new album, "Arena," his first release in four years.

BOWERY BALLROOM

6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—Dec. 17: The blues-rock veterans **Boss Hog,** who haven't released an album since the dawn of the new millennium, are back. Led by the strikingly photogenic Cristina Martinez and the erstwhile Blues Explosion front man Jon Spencer, a husband-and-wife duo who met while playing in the noise-punk band Pussy Galore, Boss Hog puts a sexy spin on an old sound. Dec. 26: **Kimya Dawson,** the charming, witty, and sober songwriter from New York's intimate antifolk scene, is hosting a "10 Years Off the Sauce Extravaganza!" She'll be joined by many of her musical friends (all of whom are recovering addicts), including the acoustic-punk demagogue **Joie DBG** and the soulful spellbinder **Ish Marquez.**

FILLMORE NEW YORK AT IRVING PLAZA

17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—Dec. 27: The **New York Dolls.** While the current incarnation of the band only features two original members, including the lead singer, David Johanssen, the Dolls remain the archetypal proto-punk band (though Iggy & the Stooges may beg to differ). They slapped on the mascara for their comeback album, "One Day It Will Please Us to Remember Even This," in 2006, which proved that the Dolls are capable of making hard-rocking music that doesn't sully their storied legacy.

HIGHLINE BALLROOM

431 W. 16th St. (212-414-5994)—Dec. 18: As half of the genre-straddling, lo-fi alternative-weirdo duo Ween, Gene Ween helped create a safe place for juvenile shenanigans and musical exploration to coexist. His partner in crime, Dean Ween, formed an offshoot project called Moistboyz to pursue a more aggressive (albeit equally silly) brand of rock. And now Gene has assembled a side project, the **Gene Ween Band,** to showcase his own extracurricular muse.

JOE'S PUB

425 Lafayette St. (212-539-8777)—Dec. 17: The guitarist and singer **Howard Fishman.** Dec. 18:

JON HAN

The female-fronted local soul group the **Sweet Divines** is joined by the veteran singer **Howard Tate.** Dec. 18-20: The invaluable New York institution the **Loser's Lounge** celebrates fifteen years of simultaneously honoring and deconstructing the classics with a reprise of their very first show—a tribute to the music of Burt Bacharach. He wrote hits for artists as diverse as Dionne Warwick, Tom Jones, Love, and Gene Pitney, which makes his catalogue perfect for this do-anything amalgamation of musicians and some of the best singers you've never heard.

MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

Seventh Ave. at 33rd St. (212-307-7171)—Dec. 17: In the mid-nineties, the lippy British pop band **Oasis** was perched on the precipice of global dominance. Hit singles, model wives, and headline-making hedonism were all the order of the day for the band, led by the brothers Noel and Liam Gallagher. A flawed third album, "Be Here Now," in 1997, scuttled their momentum, but the Gallaghers didn't give up. Their latest effort, "Dig Out Your Soul," retains a whiff of the brashness of their early work but also packs a dose of well-honed maturity. The eccentric indie-rock troubadour **Ryan Adams** opens with his band, the Cardinals.

MUSIC HALL OF WILLIAMSBURG

66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-486-5400)—Dec. 17: The **Gene Ween Band** (see the Highline Ballroom). Dec. 27-30: The Hasidic reggae performer **Matisyahu** wraps up his eight nights of Hanukkah. He has special guests each night, and they include **Little Jackie, Brett Dennen,** and **Assembly of Dust.**

SOUTHPAW

125 Fifth Ave., Park Slope, Brooklyn (718-230-0236)—Dec. 19: **Evan Dando,** of the Lemonheads. Dec. 24: The Brooklyn-based label JDub Records offers "Jewltide 6," with performances by **DeLeon, Joro Boro,** and others. Dec. 27: The gimlet-eyed folksinger **Dar Williams.**

THE STONE

Avenue C at 2nd St. (No phone)—Dec. 28: The longtime downtown fixtures **Elysian Fields** luxuriate in a spare sound that emphasizes the singer Jennifer Charles's breathy delivery. Charles's partner since the beginning, in 1995, is the impeccably tasteful guitarist Oren Bloedow, whose intricate playing evokes the craftsmanship and musicality of the Funk Brothers, Motown's famous session band. For this show they will be performing songs from their forthcoming album, "The Afterlife," a worthy addition of dark and literate songs to their catalogue of haunting noir-pop. Joining the pair are the similarly restrained Thomas Bartlett, on piano, and Matt Johnson, on drums. *(For more information, visit www.thestonenyc.com.)*

TOWN HALL

123 W. 43rd St. (212-840-2824)—Dec. 18: The winsome local singer-songwriter **Ingrid Michaelson** celebrates the season with her second annual Holiday Hop.

WEBSTER HALL

125 E. 11th St. (212-353-1600)—Dec. 17-18: **CSS,** an artsy coed ensemble from São Paulo, approaches dance rock with an old-fashioned punk attitude. They favor bubbly guitar-and-synth-fuelled English-language romps about the socialite Paris Hilton, the fashion magazine *Visionaire*, and other twenty-first-century pop-culture ephemera. Dec. 21-23 and Dec. 25: The Hasidic performer **Matisyahu's** eight-nights-of-reggae Hanukkah celebration (see the Music Hall of Williamsburg). Dec. 27: New York's joyously absurdist gypsy-punk collective **Gogol Bordello** vaulted out of the local underground and into the global spotlight when Madonna took its charismatic Ukrainian expat front man, Eugene Hutz, onstage with her at Live 8 in the summer of 2007. The band's alchemy of disparate styles (everything from dub to flamenco) will never be mainstream-radio fodder, but its brave brand of global rock is undeniably appealing.

THE ZIPPER FACTORY THEATRE

336 W. 37th St. (212-352-3101)—Dec. 16: The singer-songwriter **Mike Errico** rings in the holidays.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL

59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—Through Dec. 27: The cabaret mainstay **Andrea Marcovicci** presents her latest show, "Marcovicci Sings Movies II."

BIRDLAND

315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—Dec. 17-20: The **Freddy Cole** quartet. Old-school expertise and unerring musicianship solidify Cole's status as jazz's premier singer. Dec. 21-25: The vocalist **Hilary Kole** and the saxophonist **Bob Kindred,** along with a slew of luminaries, offer up a jazz nativity. Dec. 26-27: With the Cannonball Adderley Legacy project, the drummer **Louis Hayes** salutes the fervent hard-bop sound of his former boss. **Julius Tolentino** holds down the essential alto-saxophone position.

BLUE NOTE

131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Dec. 17-21: **Béla Fleck** and the **Flecktones,** the popular fusion band led by the banjo virtuoso. Dec. 23-Jan. 4: The trumpeter **Chris Botti** is backed by a blue-chip band. Among the supporting musicians are the guitarist **Mark Whitfield,** the pianist **Billy Childs,** and the drummer **Billy Kilson.**

CAFÉ CARLYLE

Carlyle Hotel, Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—The bighearted, gruff-voiced entertainer **Steve Tyrell** has the stage through the end of the year.

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA

Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—Dec. 16-21: In addition to being an extraordinarily gifted bassist, **Christian McBride** has proved himself to be a steadfast bandleader. His quintet features the saxophonist **Ron Blake** and the pianist **Geoffrey Keezer.** Dec. 22-28: An agile pianist, a subtle vocalist, and an all-around charming entertainer, **Barbara Carroll** may be the perfect artist to pull off a holiday-themed jazz program. She's joined by the saxophonist **Ken Peplowski** and the bassist **Jay Leonhart.**

EDISON BALLROOM

240 W. 47th St. (212-201-7650)—Dec. 20-23 and Dec. 25-Jan. 3: **George Gee** leads his twenty-two-piece big band, the **Make Believe Ballroom Orchestra,** back to the days when men wore hats and Lindy Hopping was all the rage. This seasonal show, "Sleigh Bells Swing," includes tap dancers, aerialists, and other dramatic elements.

FEINSTEIN'S AT LOEWS REGENCY

540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (212-339-4095)—Through Dec. 31: **Michael Feinstein** is putting a holiday spin on one of his most successful musical endeavors, his recent reinterpretation of the work of Frank Sinatra.

JAZZ STANDARD

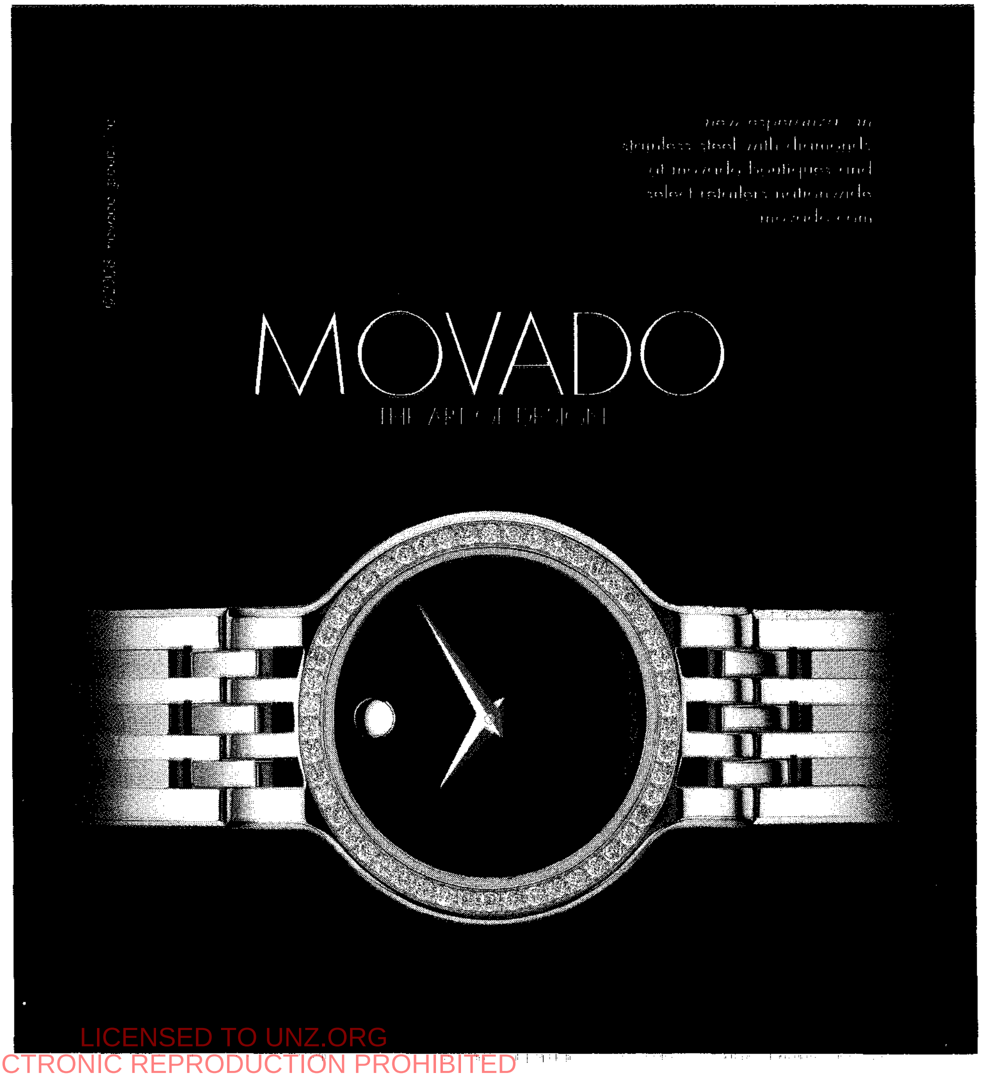
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—Dec. 18-21: The **Russell Malone** quartet. Malone can make guitar nerds drool with his hurtling technique. To his credit, though, Malone curbs his enthusiasm often enough to let in measured lyricism. Dec. 22: The **Mingus Orchestra.** Dec. 23: The bright and wild sounds of New York's own **Hypnotic Brass Ensemble.** Dec. 26-28: The pianist **Mulgrew Miller,** who has been playing in Dave Holland's band recently, tends to his own Wingspan ensemble, which includes the saxophonist **Steve Wilson,** the trumpeter **Duane Eubanks,** and the vibraphonist **Steve Nelson,** another Holland collaborator. Dec. 29: The **Mingus Dynasty.**

(LE) POISSON ROUGE

158 Bleecker St. (212-796-0741)—Dec. 29: The recently revived Salsa Meets Jazz series continues with the **Bobby Sanabria Big Band,** which will feature **Candido,** on conga, along with the Klezmatics trumpeter **Frank London.**

VILLAGE VANGUARD

178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Dec. 16-21 and Dec. 23-28: A holiday-season tradition, the year's end signals the return of pianist **Cedar Walton** to the Vanguard. A trio with the



bassist **David Williams** and the drummer **Joe Farnsworth** takes week one; a quartet featuring the saxophonist **Vincent Herring** follows. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium B.C."** Through March 15. ♦ **"The Philippe de Montebello Years: Curators Celebrate Three Decades of Acquisitions."** Through Feb. 1. ♦ **"Art and Love in Renaissance Italy."** Love ignites slowly in this show, which includes majolica plates commemorating engagements, bronze bowls celebrating weddings, and portraits of widows in mourning. But the exhibition, which is premised on the sensual aspects of love—the ancient concept of Eros, revived in the early sixteenth century—doesn't stay chaste for long. Portraits of courtesans (ladies of "carnal commerce") sidle up next to pornographic prints detailing *i modi* (the sexual positions) and a wild "Phallic Head Plate" reminiscent of Arcimboldo's vegetable confections. Some of the love stories here come with all the intrigue that one might expect from the age of Machiavelli and the Medici. Duke Francesco de' Medici and his mistress, Bianca Cappello, married in 1578, and both died nine years later. The presumed cause of death, in both cases, was poison. Through Feb. 16. ♦ **"Landscapes Clear and Radiant: The Art of Wang Hui (1632-1717)."** Through Jan. 4. ♦ **"Raqib Shaw."** Through March 1. ♦ **"Calder Jewelry."** Through March 1. ♦ **"Reality Check,"** an installation of contemporary photographs drawn largely from the museum's collection, tackles the familiar issue of the medium's relation to the real. Once assumed to be nothing more than a marvellous recording device, the camera was used to deceive very early on, and these days deception seems to be one of its prime functions. This exhibition lines up work by the usual suspects (Thomas Demand, Gregory Crewdson, James Casebere, Vik Muniz) alongside a smattering of historical precedents and savvy recent acquisitions. Among the latter are two pictures that are at once super-real and weirdly unbelievable: Julian Faulhaber's ultramodern gas station, glowing like a spaceship, and Mark Wyse's closeup of a dead squirrel on a suburban street—a classic fallen warrior, poignant and grotesque. Through March 22. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave."** Through Feb. 16. ♦ **"Joan Miró: Painting and Anti-Painting, 1927-1937."** Through Jan. 12. ♦ **"Van Gogh and the Colors of the Night."** Through Jan. 5. ♦ **"Pipilotti Rist: Pour Your Body Out (7354 Cubic Meters)."** Through Feb. 2. ♦ **"New Photography 2008: Josephine Meckseper and Mikhael Subotzky."** Through Jan. 5. ♦ **"Focus: Sol LeWitt."** Through June 29. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"Theanyspacewhatever."** Through Jan. 7. ♦ **"Catherine Opie: American Photographer."** Through Jan. 7. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 7:45.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3600)—**"William Eggleston: Democratic Camera, Photographs and Video, 1961-2008."** Through Jan. 25. ♦ **"Alexander Calder: The Paris Years, 1926-1933."** Through Feb. 15. ♦ **"Corin Hewitt: Seed Stage."** Through Jan. 4. ♦ **"Signs of the Times."** Through Jan. 11. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"The Black List Project: Timothy Greenfield-Sanders and Elvis Mitchell."** Through March 29. ♦ **"Gilbert & George."** Through Jan. 11. ♦ **"Jesper Just: Romantic Delusions."** Through Jan. 4. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and weekends, 11 to 6.)

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—**"Climate Change: The Threat to Life and a New Energy Future."** Through Aug. 16. ♦ **"The Horse."** Through Jan. 4. ♦ **"The Butterfly Conservatory: Tropical Butterflies Alive in Winter."** Through May 25. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

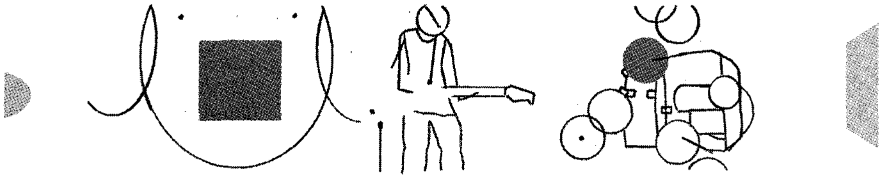
COOPER-HEWITT NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 91st St. (212-849-8300)—**"Wall Stories: Children's Wallpaper and Books."** Through April 5. ♦ China's rapid shift from an agrarian to an urban society—some hundred and sixty Chinese cities have populations exceeding one million, versus just nine in the U.S.—has caused an unprecedented housing crunch. **"Solos: Tulou, Affordable Housing for China"** looks at one solution, proposed by the architectural firm Urbanus for the city of Guangzhou. Tulou takes its name and inspiration from the circular earthen complexes that have provided Chinese villages with housing and protection for centuries, reinterpreting the form as a handsome, circular low-rise that curls around its central courtyard like a nautilus. The balance of shared and private space, modern amenities and traditional forms, all in a low-profile, historically familiar structure, might have pleased Jane Jacobs. The two hundred and forty-five apartments are models of efficiency, and rent (no weeping, New Yorkers) runs from $86 to $114 per month. Models, photographs, slides, and text document the project, and a walk-through scale model demonstrates the pleasing practicality of living spaces as orderly as ship cabins. Through April 5. (Open Mondays through Thursdays, 10 to 5, Fridays, 10 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, noon to 6.)

THE DRAWING CENTER
35 Wooster St. (212-219-2166)—**"Matt Mullican: A Drawing Translates the Way of Thinking."** Through Feb. 5. (Open Tuesdays through Fridays, 10 to 6, and Saturdays 11 to 6.)

FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—**"Andrea Riccio: Renaissance Master of Bronze."** Through Jan. 18. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5.)

JEWISH MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 92nd St. (212-423-3200)—In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, two Jewish theatre companies (one performing in Yiddish, the other in Hebrew) were established in Moscow, and protected and promoted, at least for a time, by the Soviet government. **"Chagall and the Artists of the Russian Jewish Theatre, 1919-1949"** surveys this brief golden age through films, posters, photographs, costumes, and set designs by Robert Falk, Ignaty Nivinsky, and Natan Altman, among others. A series of mural-size paintings made by Chagall for the State Yiddish Chamber Theatre in 1920 fills one gallery with prismatic scenes of dancing, music, and feasting—marrying politics, religion, and folklore with an avant-garde sensibility. The murder of the actor Solomon Mikhoels—the guiding light of the Yiddish theatre since 1919—by Stalin in 1948 brought the period to a tragic end, but it is a joy to see the works resurrected here. Through March 22. ♦ **"The Dead Sea Scrolls: Mysteries of the Ancient World."** Through Jan. 4. ♦ **"The Hanukkah Project: The Sound of Light by Julianne Swartz."** Opens Dec. 21. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 11 to 5:45, and Thursdays, 11 to 8.)

MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM
225 Madison Ave., at 36th St. (212-685-0008)—**"Drawing Babar: Early Drafts and Watercolors."** Through Jan. 4. ♦ **"Protecting the Word: Bookbindings of the Morgan."** Through March 29.



LAURENT CILLUFFO

POP NOTES
ON POINT

At the time of Anthony Hamilton's first major success—"Comin' from Where I'm From," in 2003—he offered an antidote to most other contemporary R. & B. stars. Where they played to teens, he played to adults. Where they opted for slick production, he embraced the organic sound of early-seventies soul. While they dressed up (bespoke suits), he dressed down (turtlenecks). Hamilton's follow-up, "Ain't Nobody Worryin'," found him advancing his earthy, plainspoken aesthetic, though sometimes at the expense of memorable melodies.

"The Point of It All" (Zomba), Hamilton's new album, comes at the end of a busy stretch that included guest appearances on Al Green's "Lay It Down" and a singing cameo in the film "American Gangster." On the first track, "The News," Hamilton makes like a modern-day Curtis Mayfield, adopting both Mayfield's cadences and his subject matter. But, as with other touchstones—Bobby Womack, Marvin Gaye—influences are not imitated so much as integrated. "Cool," the album's lead single, has a contemporary sound, a contemporary co-star (the rapper David Banner), and even a contemporary message: it's a love song about a couple who, without money to entertain each other, must find simpler ways to spend their evenings. But it's timeless thanks to Hamilton's highly moral sense of love and highly powerful vocals. The title track's skeletal arrangement is fleshed out by Hamilton's raw declarations of need ("Whenever we're apart / it damn near starves my heart").

Contemporary soul stars who aim for the adult market can drift into platitudinous neutrality—John Legend, for example. But Hamilton and his collaborators steer clear of dullness. The multi-instrumentalist Mark Batson contributes edgy, angular keyboards to songs like "The Day We Met," and on the extended suite "Prayin' for You / Superman" Hamilton moves from swing-funk to full-blown gospel to a stark piano ballad. If there's a concern, it's that Hamilton is reluctant to stray too far from matters of the heart. "Fallin' in Love" has such a menacing blaxploitation arrangement that it would have been more satisfying as a political piece: if not "(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below We're All Gonna Go," at least "Trouble Man." Still, the album's overall emotional heft reduces these complaints to quibbles and magnifies its charms into considerable achievements.

—*Ben Greenman*

More room should be a holiday tradition.

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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK FOR THE AGES

There are two Cindy Sherman exhibitions in town right now—one, at Skarstedt, of the terrific "History Portraits" she made nearly twenty years ago, and another, of entirely new work, at Metro Pictures. How does a working artist compete with her own greatest hits? By remaining as shrewd as she is witty, and by putting more of herself back in the picture. The "History" photographs are based—sometimes literally, sometimes loosely—on Old Master paintings of many periods; they use a slew of comic and theatrical devices, including crude prosthetics, wigs, and props. The staging of the new work is no less cheesy or hilarious, but Sherman's subject is closer to home: advancing age and eroding beauty. She thinks of the women she inhabits here as "really tough broads who have lived through a lot and are kind of sad"—but are not about to betray it. The makeup is clownish and the satire blunt, but Sherman finds something fragile and frightened behind these brittle façades, and, ever so subtly, she lets it bleed through.

—Vince Aletti

(Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10:30 to 5, Fridays, 10:30 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

NEW MUSEUM

235 Bowery, at Prince St. (212-219-1222)—**"Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone."** Through Jan. 26. ♦ **"Live Forever: Elizabeth Peyton."** Through Jan. 11. ♦ **"Museum as Hub: Six Degrees."** Through Jan. 11. (Open Wednesdays and weekends, noon to 6, and Thursdays and Fridays, noon to 10.)

PALITZ GALLERY

11 E. 61st St. (212-754-5121)—**"Michelangelo: The Man and the Myth."** A handful of graphite drawings—"Study for a Christ in Limbo," "Sacrifice of Isaac," and "Studies for the Head of Leda," all on loan from the Casa Buonarroti, in Florence—make this show worth a visit. But a regrettable 1982 bronze cast of Michelangelo's 1499 masterpiece "Pietá" and ephemera, such as a note scrawled by the artist to his assistants, seem more about stoking the cult of Michelangelo than about showcasing significant discoveries. We already know that Michelangelo was a genius, made immortal by admirers like Vasari; a wall label exhorting visitors to "pause for a moment to reflect on the sheer beauty" of the art seems absurdly superfluous. Through Jan. 4. (Open daily. For hours and to buy tickets, visit ticketweb.com.)

P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER

22-25 Jackson Ave., at 46th Ave., Long Island City (718-784-2084)—**"NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith."** Through Jan. 26. ♦ **"Gino de Dominicis."** Through Feb. 9. ♦ **"Leandro Erlich: Swimming Pool."** Through April 13. ♦ **"Yael Bartana."** Through Jan. 19. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, noon to 6.)

QUEENS MUSEUM OF ART

Flushing Meadows–Corona Park (718-592-9700)—**"Reason's Clue."** With a title borrowed from Lao Tzu, the show features works by eight artists—Xu Bing, Michael Cherney, and Hong Hao among them—who mine the relationship between China and the West. Through Jan. 4. ♦ **"Stephen Talasnik, Panorama: The Mapping of Prediction."** Through Jan. 25. ♦ **"Pedro Meyer: Heresies."** Through Jan. 4. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and Saturdays and Sundays, noon to 5.)

STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

144 W. 125th St. (212-864-4500)—**"Barkley L. Hendricks: Birth of the Cool."** Through March 15. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, and Sundays, noon to 6, and Saturdays, 10 to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

DUANE MICHALS

Most of Michals's "Photographs from the Floating World" are shaped like the stylized fans seen in Japanese prints. Set in dark backgrounds, they look like arched windows onto a world that, even at its most ordinary, veers giddily into fantasy. Michals depends a bit too heavily on charm, which stretches thin in the playfully sentimental texts scrawled around each image. But there is genuine pleasure here, and it buoys the works, which include photographs of fireworks and fireflies, geese and morning glories, a figure with a parasol in a snowy landscape, and a dashing young van Gogh character striding across a field of sunflowers. Through Jan. 10. (Pace/MacGill, 32 E. 57th St. 212-759-7999.)

Short List

JOHN BALDESSARI: Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160. Through Jan. 10. **JOHN MARIN:** Ward, 44 E. 74th St. 212-744-7306. Through Dec. 20. **CINDY SHERMAN:** Skarstedt, 20 E. 79th St. 212-737-2060. Through Dec. 20. **JEFF SONHOUSE:** Tilton, 8 E. 76th St. 212-737-2221. Through Dec. 23. **ALEXI WORTH:** D. C. Moore, 724 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-247-2111. Through Jan. 3. **"HELEN FRANKENTHALER AT EIGHTY":** Knoedler, 19 E. 70th St. 212-794-0550. Through Jan. 10.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

RICHARD AVEDON

Avedon understood that every portrait sitting was a performance, both in front of and behind the camera, and he knew how to use the drama of confrontation and collaboration to get at something real. With patience, artifice could yield authenticity. Some of the nearly sixty photographs gathered in this major mini-retrospective are merely spectacular—vivid, theatrical coups. Others feel quietly revelatory, full of empathy and soul. None are boring. Included are a number of his greatest portraits (Michelangelo Antonioni, Marilyn Monroe, the Windsors, the Everly Brothers) and many of his most appealing (Anna Magnani, Rudolf Nureyev, Bob Dylan, the Beatles). Through Jan. 3. (PaceWildenstein, 545 W. 22nd St. 212-989-4258.)

JOYCE PENSATO

Pensato's stripped-down, charcoal-on-paper portraits—of Mickey Mouse, Felix the Cat, Donald Duck, Homer Simpson, and Stan from "South Park"—marry Pop banality with Ab-Ex angst. Her figures grin, grimace, and perform macabre jigs. Step close and you can see how the artist has applied herself to the task: the paper is worn and distressed—even shredded. Titles like "On the Way" and "Get Me to the Other Side" suggest transportation, perhaps of a spiritual bent. In this context, gazing into the bulging eyes of cartoon characters can be more challenging than reading Sartre. Through Jan. 3. (Petzel, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-680-9467.)

JULIA SCHMIDT

Schmidt trained in Leipzig, but her paintings have more in common with the allusive canvases of the Belgian artist Luc Tuymans than with the narrative extravaganzas for which the Leipzig school is best known (think Neo Rauch). Executed in oil on fibreboard, Schmidt's works depict ambiguous found images—a microscopic view of paintbrush bristles, a row of the headless mannequins used for jewelry display, the underpainting of a Botticelli. Her scumbly, pale rendering transforms her subjects into something simultaneously glorious and pedestrian. Accordingly, she's titled this show "Lavoro," Italian for "work," an insistent word that at once underscores the effort spent and romanticizes it. Through Dec. 20. (Kaplan, 525 W. 21st St. 212-645-7335.)

AARON YOUNG

This aggressive young artist, who has turned out graffiti-covered boulders and orchestrated motorcycle performances that result in Pollock-like panels, has built a small white room inside the gallery. Walk in, and you are greeted by three grubby yellowish canvases and a metal box taking quarters. Your twenty-five cents buys sixty seconds of darkness, revealing glowing images of mushroom clouds on the paintings. It's not a new trick (Philippe Parreno has used it, for one), and it underwhelms here. But a pile of bronze replicas of defaced N.Y.P.D. barriers suggests that Young hasn't abandoned his interest in uncivil disobedience. Through Dec. 20. (Bortolami, 510 W. 25th St. 212-727-2050.)

Short List

TOMMA ABTS: Zwirner, 525 W. 19th St. 212-727-2070. Through Dec. 23. **NATHALIE DJURBERG:** Feuer, 530 W. 24th St. 212-989-7700. Through Jan. 24. **ROBERT GOBER / FELIX GONZALEZ-TORRES:** Rosen, 525 W. 24th St. Through Jan. 31. **DANA HOEY:** Petzel, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-680-9467. Through Jan. 24. **JÁN MANČUŠKA:** Kreps, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-741-8849. Through Jan. 10. **KAY ROSEN:** Gray, 526 W. 26th St. 212-399-2636. Through Jan. 10; Lambert, 550 W. 21st St. 212-242-3611. Through Jan. 3. **ERIK SCHMIDT:** Dee, 545 W. 20th St. 212-924-7545. Through Jan. 10. **CINDY SHERMAN:** Metro Pictures, 519 W. 24th St. 212-206-7100. Through Dec. 23. **ZOE STRAUSS:** Silverstein, 535 W. 24th St. 212-627-3930. Through Jan. 10. **"THE WORLD IS ALL THAT IS THE CASE":** Hudson Franklin, 508 W. 26th St. 212-741-1189. Through Dec. 20.

CINDY SHERMAN, "UNTITLED, 2008" / COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES

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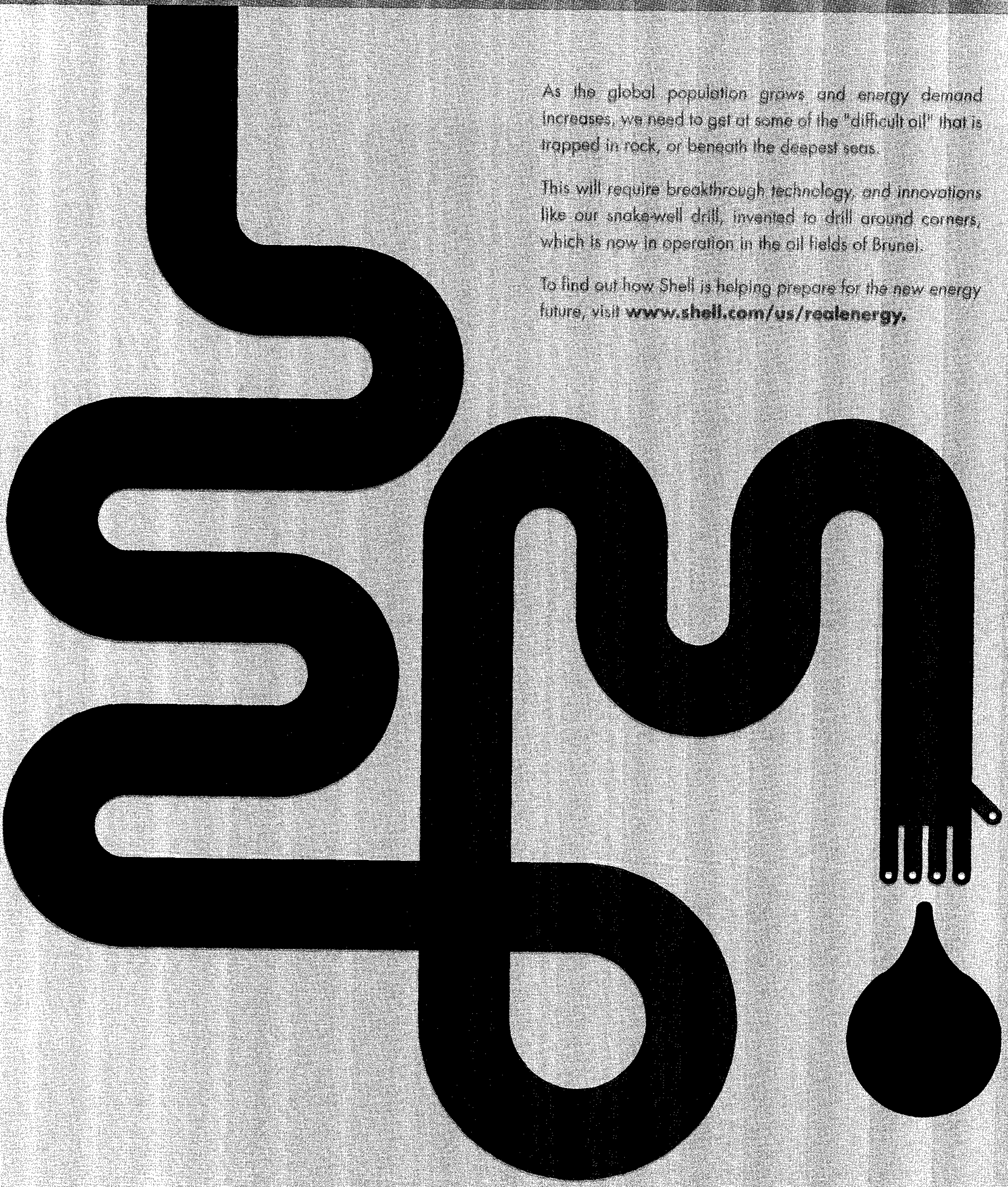
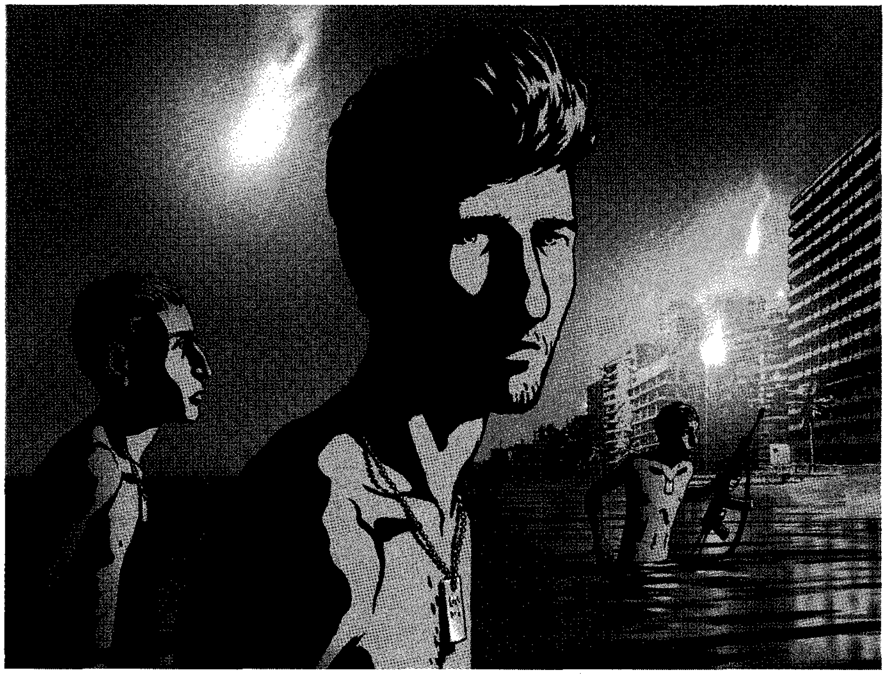


GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

ALAN REID
Reid uses colored pencils on canvas, leaving gauzy pastel impressions that might be mistaken for faded frescoes. The effect suits this exhibition, breezily titled "Heiresses on Terraces." Young, androgynous men and women look like hybrids of Weimar Republic revellers (à la Christian Schad's dissipated socialites), Fitzgerald's flappers, and Leonardo's aquiline beauties. A handsome dandy gets his closeup in "Staircase," while a cougar chomps on an unruffled woman's arm in "Marrakesh." Sometimes, as in "The Credits," compositions dissolve into Mannerist chaos. At other moments, decadent silliness reigns, as in the painting "Now That We've Trashed the Hotel, Can We Have a Baby?" Through Dec. 31. (Cooley, 34 Orchard St. 212-680-0564.)



"Waltz with Bashir," an animated documentary by Ari Folman, opens Dec. 26.

SONY PICTURES CLASSICS

Short List

JOSÉ LEÓN CERRILLO: Dispatch, 127 Henry St. 212-227-2783. Through Jan. 31. **MATT DUKCLO:** Eleven Rivington, 11 Rivington St. 212-982-1930. Through Dec. 21. **DANIEL GUZMÁN:** Harris Lieberman, 89 Vandam St. 212-206-1290. Through Jan. 10. **R. H. QUAYTMAN:** Abreu, 36 Orchard St. 212-995-2302. Through Feb. 1. **CAROL RAMA:** Maccarone, 630 Greenwich St. 212-431-4977. Through Dec. 20.

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET
Balanchine's "Nutcracker," from 1954, offers sugarplums and snowflakes, plenty of scintillating dancing, and Tchaikovsky's wonderfully imaginative score. (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. Dec. 16, Dec. 18, Dec. 22-23, and Dec. 29-30 at 6; Dec. 17 at 2 and 6; Dec. 19 at 8; Dec. 20 and Dec. 26-27 at 2 and 8; Dec. 21 and Dec. 28 at 1 and 5; and Dec. 24 at 2. Through Jan. 3.)

DANIEL GWIRTZMAN DANCE COMPANY
Gradually building up from a solo into a quartet, "Timebomb" doesn't explode all at once. Instead, eying each other warily as they work in the round, negotiating handholds and counterbalances in fraught encounters, the dancers suggest participants in the kind of complex schoolyard game that can turn brutal in an instant. A drum-heavy score helps sustain the tension, but it's mostly Gwirtzman's choreographic craft and invention—setting the free swing of limbs and bodies against forces of suspension and hesitation—that keep the work taut and surprising. (Baryshnikov Arts Center, 450 W. 37th St. 212-543-1367. Dec. 16-20 at 7 and Dec. 21 at 3.)

TANZTHEATER WUPPERTAL PINA BAUSCH
Pina Bausch applies her impressionistic approach to the wide canvas of India in "Bamboo Blues," featuring the delightful *Kuchipudi* dancer Shantala Shivalingappa. (BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Ave. 718-636-4100. Dec. 16-17 and Dec. 19-20 at 7:30.)

LES BALLETS TROCKADERO DE MONTE CARLO
Much more than a bunch of guys in tutus and toe shoes, the all-male Trocks take their comedy, and their ballet, very seriously. In recent years, the technical level has risen high enough to give their parodies an edge so fine it almost disappears. That's particularly true of the new Spanish-themed "Majisimas," set to music from Massenet's "El Cid." Yet there's still plenty of blunter slapstick and hilarious tweaking of ballet mores in the old favorites spread across two programs. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Dec. 16-17, Dec. 22-23, and Dec. 29-30 at 7:30; Dec. 18-19 and Dec. 26-27 at 8; Dec. 20 at 3 and 8; Dec. 24 at 3; and Dec. 28 at 3 and 7:30. Through Jan. 4.)

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE
In its third week, the fiftieth-anniversary season finds a worthy outlet for its largesse, when Wynton Marsalis and the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra move into City Center. Two alternating programs sample from the plentiful Ailey back catalogue set to Duke Ellington compositions; trust Marsalis and his gang to bring out all the tonal color and swing the Ailey dancers to new heights. The heat lowers some in the fourth week, with programs that widen to include more recent additions to the company repertory, including Mauro Bigonzetti's new "Festa Barocca." (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Dec. 17-19 and Dec. 24-26 at 8, Dec. 20 and Dec. 27 at 2 and 8, Dec. 21 and Dec. 28 at 3 and 7:30, and Dec. 23 and Dec. 30 at 7. Through Jan. 4.)

DAVID GORDON / PICK UP PERFORMANCE CO(S.)
The witty postmodernist David Gordon presents "Trying Times (Remembered)," a reconstruction of his work from 1982. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Dec. 18-20 at 7:30.)

"MAMA, A MODERN FOLKTALE"
Mary Seidman marshals a sisterhood of forty-plus women for an epic-scaled demonstration of how the earth mother is endangered and female creative energy can save the world. The cast, which ranges in age from infant to retiree, includes several standout special guests: Janis Brenner, Amy Marshall, Amy Pivar, and the former Paul Taylor star Lisa Viola. Live and mobile singers realize Cristina Spinei's folkish score. (La Mama, 74A E. 4th St. 212-475-7710. Dec. 18-20 at 7:30 and Dec. 21 at 2:30.)

"DANCE AND PROCESS"
Three young practitioners—Hilary Clark, Mina Nishimura, and Kayvon Pourazar—show the work they've devised under the intelligent eye of the veteran downtown choreographer Yasuko Yokoshi. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793, ext. 11. Dec. 18-19 at 8.)

MOVE
The Vancouver-based troupe of the twenty-one-year-old choreographer Josh Beamish makes its U.S. début. "Memento," a short and non-interactive duet for the choreographer and Alison Denham, establishes the most distinctive feature of Beamish's vocabulary: a modern-dance version of popping, quick, staccato, and highly articulated. That style also surfaces in the hour-long ensemble piece "Trap Door Party," juxtaposed against a kind of deconstructed Baroque court dancing. Early sections, isolating the dancers in squares and bands of light, are stronger than later ones, in which the group suddenly turns on one another. (Joyce SoHo, 155 Mercer St. 212-352-3101. Dec. 18-19 at 8 and Dec. 20 at 3 and 8.)

"FOOD FOR THOUGHT"
Danspace presents its biannual series benefitting the AIDS Service Center—performances are ten dollars, or five plus two cans of food. On Thursday, the performers include the acrobatic balance duo Paradizo Dance; on Friday, the dancemakers—including Shannon Hummel and Laura Diffenderfer—revisit and revise early material. Saturday is devoted to theatrically minded choreographers, like Jillian Sweeney, who have an interest in character development through movement. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-8194. Dec. 18-20 at 8:30.)

"WAIT FOR GREEN"
The choreographer Annie-B Parson, known for her imaginative work with Big Dance Theatre and with various non-dancers, sends the game-for-anything members of the post-classical string quartet Ethel up and the down the escalators and throughout the World Financial Center Winter Garden. The music and the choreography for the musicians were developed in tandem, and the result provides more proof that Ethel is not your grandfather's string quartet. (220 Vesey St. 212-945-0505. Dec. 19 at 12:30 and 7.)

"STREB AT SLAM: INVISIBLE FORCES"
Elizabeth Streb invites audiences into her Lab for Action Mechanics, in order to share some new toys. (SLAM, 51 N. First St., Brooklyn. 212-352-3101. Dec. 19 at 7, Dec. 20 at 3 and 7, and Dec. 21 at 3.)

NEW YORK THEATRE BALLET / "THE NUTCRACKER"
Tired parents may opt for this lively production, only an hour long, with inspired sets modelled after nineteenth-century English toy theatres. (Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. 212-355-6160. Dec. 20-21 at 11 A.M., 1, and 3:30.)

NOCHE FLAMENCA
The no-frills flamenco troupe and its extraordinary star, Soledad Barrio, are best experienced in intimate settings. At Joe's Pub this year, the company's artistic director, Martín Santangelo, gets into the spirit of the season with a show titled "The Rhythms of Joy." (425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Dec. 26-27 and Dec. 29-30 at 7:30 and Dec. 28 at 1:30 and 7:30. Through Dec. 31.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
HOLIDAY MUSIC

"MESSIAH"
The New York Philharmonic leads off the round of performances in the next two weeks, with the re-

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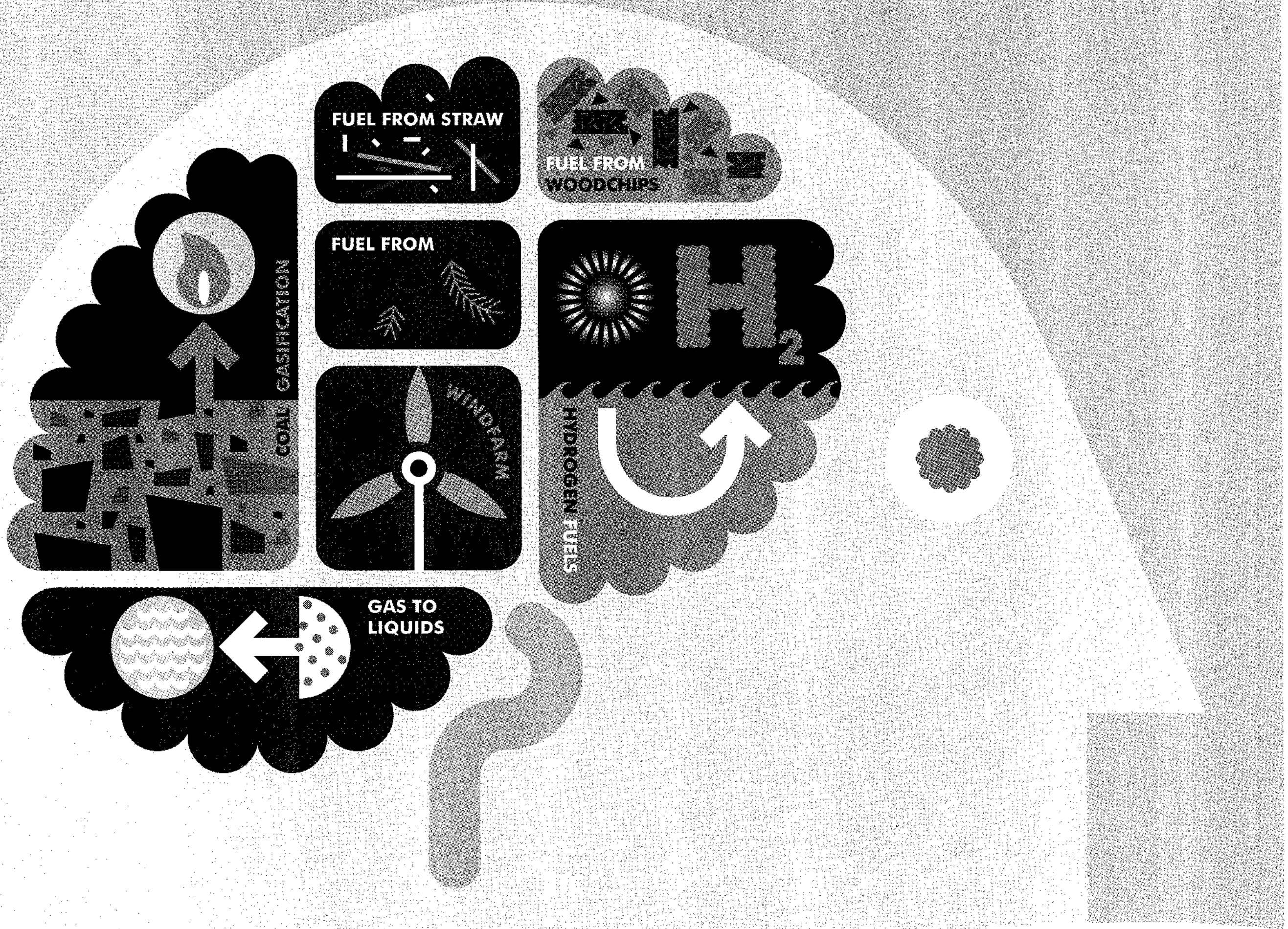
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HYDROGEN FUELS
GAS TO LIQUIDS

nowned Dutch early-music magus Ton Koopman conducting and a roster of vocal soloists that includes the splendid German countertenor Andreas Scholl. Joe Miller's mighty Westminster Symphonic Choir assists. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. Dec. 17-18 at 7:30 and Dec. 19-20 at 8.) ♦ The Masterwork Chorus, one of the fine avocational groups that have been presenting holiday performances of Handel's oratorio for decades, returns to Carnegie Hall under the firm baton of Andrew Megill, the longtime chorus master at the Spoleto Festival USA. (212-247-7800. Dec. 18 at 8 and Dec. 21 at 2 and 8.) ♦ One of the city's finest "Messiah" presentations comes from the excellent professional chorus Musica Sacra, which until last year was led by the legendary Richard Westenburg. His style offered a modern, symphonic rendering of the work that nonetheless had a light and smooth Baroque feel, a tradition that the admired new director, Kent Tritle, will probably continue. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Dec. 22-23 at 8.)

SAINT THOMAS CHOIR: "A CEREMONY OF CAROLS"
With their Handelian duties over and done, the boys of the renowned Episcopalian choir, whose church is a luxuriant example of what might be called Teddy Roosevelt Gothic, offer Britten's radiant work for treble voices and harp on a program that also includes a selection of modern and medieval carols sung by the four adults of New York Polyphony. (Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. Dec. 18 at 6:30. www.saintthomaschurch.org.)

NEW YORK POPS
The King's Singers, who (with occasional changes of personnel) have provided the world standard in male a-cappella singing for four decades, join the orchestra for two concerts of festive music conducted by the invaluable Rob Fisher; Marilyn Horne is Fisher's special guest. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Dec. 19-20 at 8.)

THE CLOISTERS: "THE PLAY OF DANIEL"
"Danielis Ludus," a play with music that has its origins in twelfth-century Beauvais, was first presented at northern Manhattan's medieval pile fifty years ago in a famed production by Noah Greenberg. This year it is offered by Gotham Early Music Scene, directed by Drew Minter. (Fort Tryon Park. 212-650-2290. Dec. 20-21 at 1 and 3.)

THE WESTERN WIND
The happily ecumenical a-cappella group sings music for Christmas (by such composers as Hassler and Britten), Hanukkah, and the winter solstice in its annual concert at the Church of St. Paul and St. Andrew. (West End Ave. at 86th St. 212-873-2848. Dec. 20 at 8.)

"WORKS & PROCESS" SERIES: PROKOFIEV'S "PETER AND THE WOLF"
The wolf arrives at the Guggenheim Museum, in a fabulous production featuring narration by Isaac Mizrahi, an art installation by the Campana Brothers, and music conducted by George Manahan. (Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3587. Dec. 20-21 at 2:30 and 4.)

NEW YORK STRING ORCHESTRA
In what is looking like a tradition, the Christmas Eve concert by Jaime Laredo's annual convocation of young virtuosos at Carnegie Hall is all-Mozart: the "Marriage of Figaro" Overture, the Violin Concerto No. 5 ("Turkish," with Augustin Hadelich), and the Symphony No. 40 in G Minor. (Dec. 24 at 7.) ♦ The final concert offers a contemporary work (by John Harbison), Mozart's Concerto for Three Pianos (featuring Joseph Kalichstein and two exceptional young colleagues, Shai Wosner and Alon Goldstein), and Mendelssohn's "Scotch" Symphony. (Dec. 28 at 2.) (212-247-7800.)

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
To hear a holiday concert in the majestic intimacy of the museum's Medieval Sculpture Hall is an essential New York experience. Lionheart, an admired New York male a-cappella group, offers "Christmas in Medieval Italy: Il Laudario di Cortona," just before Christmas Eve. (Fifth Ave. at 83rd St. 212-570-3949. Dec. 23 at 6:30 and 8:30.)

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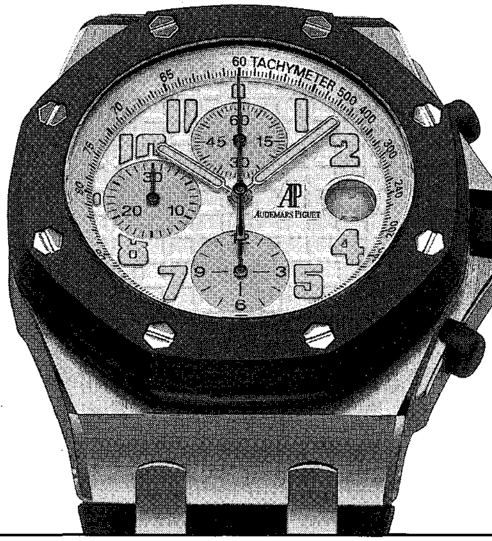

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BARGEMUSIC
The chamber-music series on Brooklyn's Fulton Ferry Landing takes place in a converted coffee barge, a cozy winter nook that offers spectacular views of New York Harbor. The fine pianist Steven Beck offers his annual performance of Bach's Goldberg Variations on Christmas Eve; cookies and eggnog are on the house. (718-624-2083. Dec. 24 at 8.)

OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
Planned in an era of abundance, John Cox's new production of Massenet's **"Thaïs"** arrives in a time of scarcity, giving the Met stage all the grandeur of a nineteen-twenties movie palace. The sole opera in which the concertmaster gets an onstage bow, "Thaïs" is not only a delivery vehicle for the magical "Méditation" but also an efficiently structured study of sex and religion that exudes elegance from every pore. The newly slimmed-down Renée Fleming—dressed by Christian Lacroix—leaves her trademark vocal mannerisms behind, offering a performance of focussed sound and captivating character. Thomas Hampson provides sterling support as the doomed monk Athanaël, as does Michael Schade in the role of Nicias; Jesús López-Cobos conducts with passion and care. (Dec. 17, Dec. 23, Dec. 27, and Dec. 30 at 8 and Dec. 20 at noon.) ♦ Franco Zeffirelli's bustling and beloved production of **"La Bohème,"** one of the great holiday favorites, returns to the house, with a cast led by Maija Kovalevska, Susanna Phillips, Ramón Vargas, and Mariusz Kwiecien; Frédéric Chaslin. (Dec. 18, Dec. 22, Dec. 26, and Dec. 29 at 8.) ♦ **"Don Giovanni,"** with a cast featuring not only the magnetic Erwin Schrott in the title role but also Tamar Iveri, Dorothea Röschmann, Matthew Polenzani, and Ildebrando D'Arcangelo; Lothar Koenigs. (Dec. 19 at 8.) ♦ Last season, it took four tenors and two sopranos to get through six shows of **"Tristan und Isolde."** Peter Seiffert and Katarina Dalayman, the lovers in this month's revival, wrestle admirably with their herculean parts; luckily, Daniel Barenboim is on hand, and he conducts a performance full of violent rapture. Kwangchul Youn, a dependable bass new to this run, sings King Marke; Michelle DeYoung contributes a voluptuous Brangäne. (Dec. 20 at 7:30. This is the final performance.) ♦ Julie Taymor's rambunctious production of **"The Magic Flute"** (sung in English) has joined "Hansel and Gretel" as one of the Met's regular holiday treats. This year's cast features several young standouts, including the up-and-coming soprano Nicole Cabell, the baritone Rodion Pogossov (who stole the show at the production's 2004 première), and the soprano Cyndia Sieden and the bass Eric Owens, renowned for their exploits in the music of Adès and Adams, respectively. (Dec. 22, Dec. 27, and Dec. 30 at 1.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

DICAPO OPERA PUCCINI CELEBRATION
Puccini's music is always with us, but his hundred-and-fiftieth birthday provides a reason to look at him anew. Eve Queler (among others) conducts members of the Opera Orchestra of New York in an evening featuring arias and scenes from every one of the composer's operas, sung by a roster that includes such fine singers as Aprile Millo, Daniela Dessì, Olga Markarina, and Francisco Casanova. (Rose Theatre, Broadway at 60th St. 212-288-9438, ext. 10. Dec. 22 at 8.)

RECITALS

PAUL GROVES
The robust American tenor, a stalwart at the Met for several years, appears with the pianist Pedja Muzijevic to sing an elegant yet weighty recital of works by Beethoven ("An die Ferne Geliebte"), Britten ("The Holy Sonnets of John Donne"), Fauré ("La Bonne Chanson"), and Rachmaninoff. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. Dec. 18 at 7:30.)

S.E.M. ENSEMBLE
The composers of the late-twentieth-century avant-garde have always been well served by the composer-

conductor Petr Kotik's group. Its next concert is devoted to "chance" music by such icons as John Cage ("Solos"), Christian Wolff, and Marcel Duchamp (*a rare musical venture*, "Erratum Musical"). (Paula Cooper Gallery, 534 W. 21st St. 718-488-7659. Dec. 18 at 8.)

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER
The renowned Wagner soprano Christine Brewer scales her voice down to a more intimate level for "The Beautiful and the Bizarre," making her Society début in selections from Handel's Nine German Arias (set to devotional texts) in a concert that also includes music by Biber (the startling "Battalia" for Strings and Continuo), Telemann, Pachelbel (the ubiquitous Canon and Gigue), and Vivaldi. (Rose Theatre, Broadway at 60th St. 212-875-5788. Dec. 19 at 7:30 and Dec. 21 at 5.)

MMARTISTS IN CONCERT
The cellist Edward Arron's assemblage of dynamic young virtuosos (including the violinist Colin Jacobsen and the violists Nicholas Cords and Max Mandel) has a knack for balancing traditional and contemporary fare. William Bolcom's "Session II" is featured in a concert that also includes music by Haydn, Boccherini, and Mozart (the string-sextet arrangement of the Sinfonia Concertante for Violin and Viola). (Fifth Ave. at 83rd St. 212-570-3949. Dec. 19 at 8.)

MUSIC AT (LE) POISSON ROUGE
The city's most enticing new-music venue (where a cash bar and a reliable kitchen await your patronage) presents a concert featuring sets by the New York string quartet Osso (whose "self-arranged" repertory includes both contemporary classical and indie rock) and by the Los Angeles piano diva Gloria Cheng. (158 Bleecker St. www.lprnyc.com. Dec. 22 at 7:30.)

MOVIES OPENING

BEDTIME STORIES
A comedy, directed by Adam Shankman, about a janitor (Adam Sandler) whose tales for his niece and nephew come true. Co-starring Keri Russell, Guy Pearce, and Courteney Cox. Opening Dec. 25. (In wide release.)

THE BROTHERS BLOOM
Adrien Brody stars as a member of a family of con men who is taken in by a strange millionaire (Rachel Weisz). Co-starring Rinko Kikuchi and Mark Ruffalo; directed by Rian Johnson. Opening Dec. 19. (In limited release.)

THE CLASS
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 19. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON
Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening Dec. 25. (In wide release.)

LAST CHANCE HARVEY
A drama about a man who seeks romance at his daughter's wedding in London. Starring Dustin Hoffman and Emma Thompson; directed by Joel Hopkins. Opening Dec. 25. (In limited release.)

MARLEY AND ME
A family comedy about a dog who is adopted by a journalist. Starring Jennifer Aniston, Owen Wilson, and Alan Arkin; directed by David Frankel. Opening Dec. 25. (In wide release.)

MOSCOW, BELGIUM
A romantic comedy, set in Ghent, about a woman on the verge of a divorce who falls in love with a younger man. Directed by Christophe van Rompaey. In Flemish. Opening Dec. 19. (Cinema Village.)

NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH
Kate Beckinsale stars in this political drama, based on a true story, about a journalist who goes to jail to protect the identity of a source. Directed by Rod Lurie; co-starring Alan Alda, Vera Farmiga, and David Schwimmer. Opening Dec. 17. (In limited release.)

REVOLUTIONARY ROAD
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 26. (Lincoln Square and Union Square.)

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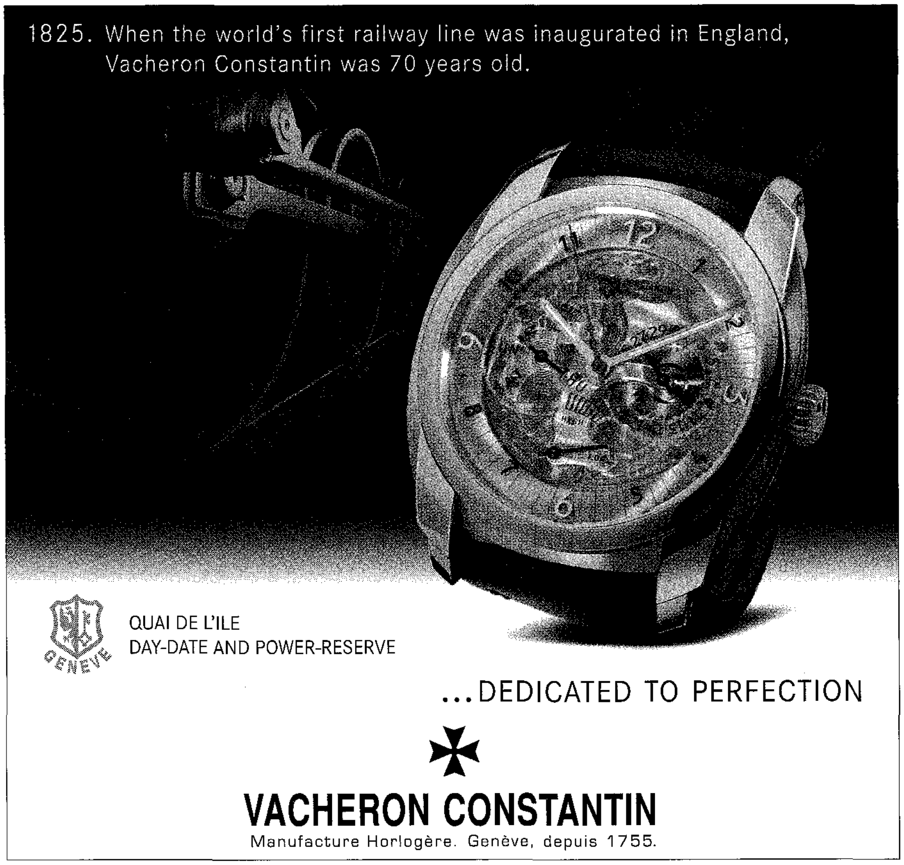
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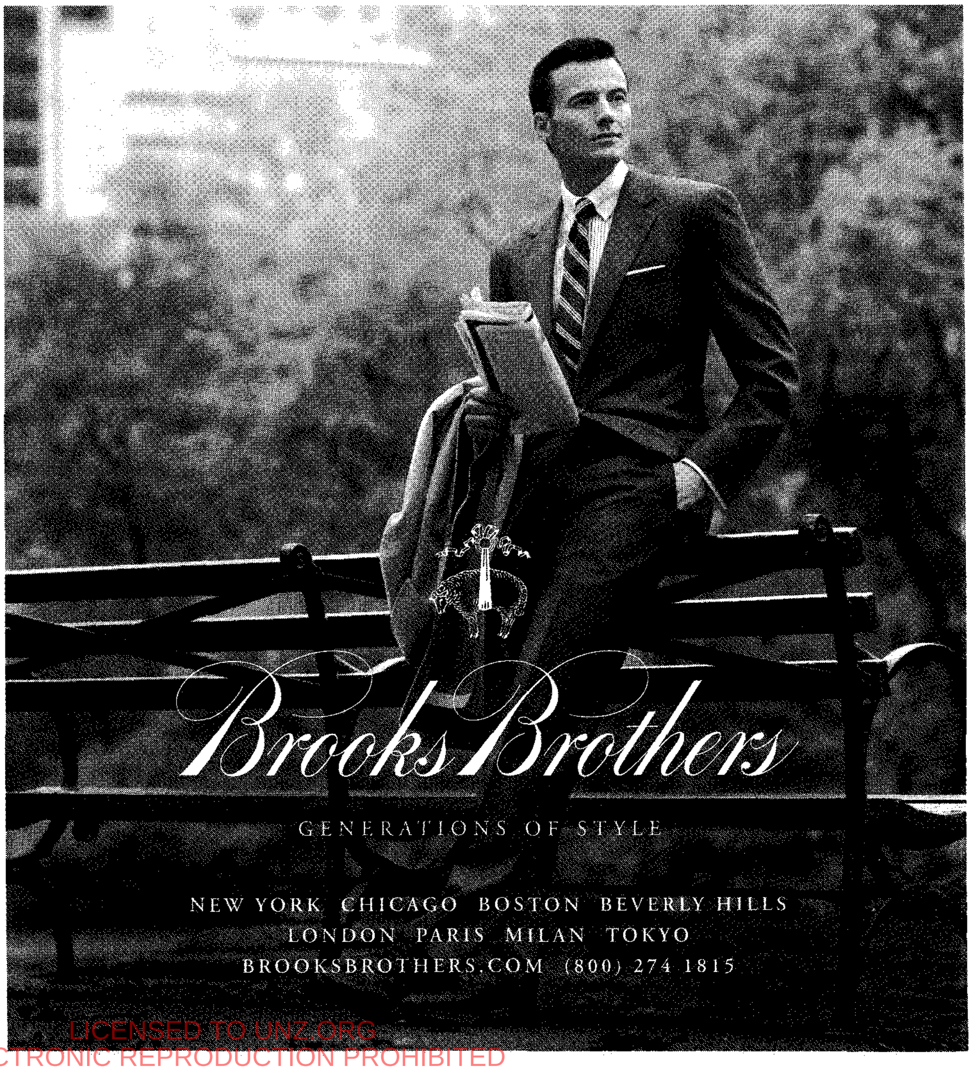
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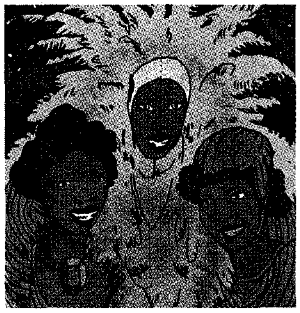
CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
THREE SISTERS

When the singing stars that make up Labelle—Patti LaBelle, Nona Hendryx, and Sarah Dash—became the first black contemporary-music act to perform at the Metropolitan Opera House, in 1974, they also became one of the first groups to infuse the look of glitter rock with soul. Dressed in silver body suits, space boots, and headpieces that brought to mind Josephine Baker fabulously strung out on Mars, the women, who had been singing together since the early nineteen-sixties, brought a new theatricality to R. & B. and funk. Gay audiences loved them, and straight women wanted to outfreak them. But no one could. Supported by Vicki Wickham, the brilliant impresario and manager, and owing largely to the extraordinary work of Hendryx, the team's resident songwriter, Labelle gave voice to the lives of black women. After nearly thirty-two years, Labelle has released a new album, "Back to Now." To commemorate their reunion, the women will take the stage at the historic Apollo Theatre on Dec. 19, where they mean to teach us a thing or two about how to put on a show, and why: to take us higher.

—Hilton Als



PUNY

SCOTT WALKER: 30 CENTURY MAN
Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening Dec. 17. (IFC Center.)

THE SECRET OF THE GRAIN
A drama, directed by Abdellatif Kechiche, about an immigrant in France who, after losing his job, attempts to open a restaurant. In Arabic, French, and Russian. Opening Dec. 24. (IFC Center.)

SEVEN POUNDS
Gabriele Muccino directed this drama, about a man who, while preparing for his suicide, falls in love. Starring Will Smith and Rosario Dawson. Opening Dec. 19. (In wide release.)

THE SPIRIT
Frank Miller directed this drama, based on the comic strip by Will Eisner, about a policeman who returns from the beyond to fight crime. Starring Gabriel Macht, Scarlett Johansson, Samuel L. Jackson, and Eva Mendes. Opening Dec. 25. (In wide release.)

THE TALE OF DESPEREAUX
An animated comedy, directed by Sam Fell and Robert Stevenhagen, about a mouse who falls in love with a princess. With the voices of Matthew Broderick, Dustin Hoffman, and Emma Watson. Opening Dec. 19. (In wide release.)

THEATER OF WAR
A documentary, directed by John Walter, about a 2006 production of Tony Kushner's adaptation of Brecht's "Mother Courage" at New York's Public Theatre. Opening Dec. 24. (Film Forum.)

VALKYRIE
Bryan Singer directed this historical drama, starring Tom Cruise as Col. Claus von Stauffenberg, a German officer who plots to kill Hitler. Co-starring Kenneth Branagh, Carice van Houten, Tom Wilkinson, and Bill Nighy. Opening Dec. 25. (In wide release.)

WALTZ WITH BASHIR
An animated documentary, directed by Ari Folman, about a young soldier's participation in Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. In Hebrew, German, English, and Arabic. Opening Dec. 26. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Sunshine Cinema.)

THE WRESTLER
Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening Dec. 17. (In wide release.)

YES MAN
A comedy starring Jim Carrey as a man who signs up for a self-help program in which he is instructed to say yes to everything. Directed by Peyton Reed; co-starring Zooey Deschanel. Opening Dec. 19. (In wide release.)

NOW PLAYING

AUSTRALIA
Preposterous epic kitsch from Baz Luhrmann. Nicole Kidman is Sarah Ashley, a rich, high-born English lady with clipped diction and a jacket that fits as tightly as a toreador's. She arrives in Darwin in 1939 to retrieve her husband, who has been dallying with Aboriginal women on the family-owned cattle station. The brawny Hugh Jackman is a roughneck known as Drover, who drives her to the interior. Of course, he will liberate the passionate sexual woman beneath the starch, and she will tame the nihilistic free spirit into a caring and responsible man. Luhrmann, lost in the desert, rushes the camera frantically along the ground, or sends it aloft in meaningless ascents. (Once he's up there, what can he do but cut to the ground again?) He wants to create huge, throbbing set pieces, but he never establishes a standard of normal reality from which those set pieces would be an exultant release. The movie is all bitter partings and joyous reunions and nasty Japanese dive-bombers who fly in and mess up everything. With Bryan Brown, David Wenham, Jack Thompson, and, as the Aboriginal shaman who arrives whenever the plot needs a touch of magic to push it along, David Gulpilil (who co-starred in the 1971 classic "Walkabout"). Written by Stuart Beattie, Ronald Harwood, and Richard Flanagan.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/8/08.) (In wide release.)

CADILLAC RECORDS
Weaving together the life stories of some of America's musical legends, the director Darnell Martin chronicles the rise and fall of Chess Records, the great Chicago blues label of the fifties and sixties. Adrien Brody stars in the vague and underwritten role of the company's co-founder, Leonard Chess. His climactic scenes with Beyoncé Knowles (who plays the troubled singer Etta James) are unconvincing and overly dramatic. But, before it all unravels, the movie highlights inspired performances that bring to life the soulful—and undisciplined—ways of some of the greatest bluesmen and early rockers. With Jeffrey Wright, who is brilliantly seductive as Muddy Waters; Columbus Short, as Little Walter; Cedric the Entertainer, as the songwriter Willie Dixon; a joyous Mos Def, as Chuck Berry; and, in a small but unforgettable performance, Eamonn Walker, as Howlin' Wolf.—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)

A CHRISTMAS TALE
The new film from Arnaud Desplechin, best known here for "Kings and Queen" (2004), weighs in at exactly two and a half hours, yet it barely finds time to peer beyond the battlefield of a single family. We are swiftly introduced to Abel (Jean-Paul Roussillon) and Junon (Catherine Deneuve), who live in Roubaix, France—the director's home town. Junon is suffering from cancer, and both of them suffer from their children: the endlessly grieving Elizabeth (Anne Consigny), the frankly irredeemable Henri (Mathieu Amalric), and Ivan (Melvil Poupaud), who is holding steady, despite the fact that his wife loves somebody else. In an often disorienting mixture of rages, flashbacks, speeches to the camera, and nods to other movies, the story rolls and stammers along, drawing the family into a Christmas get-together but denying them more than a glimpse of the harmony that we might, by tradition, expect. Desplechin's film is hard, funny, and upsetting, and even at the end we feel that we are only just getting to know these people, though it could be argued that they scarcely know themselves. With Emmanuelle Devos, who laughs at the whole pack of them, and Chiara Mastroianni (Deneuve's real-life daughter). In French.—*Anthony Lane* (11/24/08) (IFC Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON
A child is born in New Orleans in 1918 with the features and internal organs of an old man; then, as time passes, his age declines until he goes through late middle age, middle age, youth, and so on, back toward infancy and death. This science-fiction reverse-aging conceit, from an early F. Scott Fitzgerald story, has been rendered by the writer Eric Roth and the director David Fincher with a fanatical literalness that occasionally touches the uncanny but that often feels laborious and even pedantic. As Benjamin becomes younger, he turns into the handsome, fortyish Brad Pitt, and he has an affair with a vibrant, normally aging dancer (Cate Blanchett). They meet in the middle, so to speak, but the relationship is odd, since, instead of the fervent memories of youth, Benjamin has only the relief that he is no longer a crotchety old man. He's bland; he's Brad Pitt. There is much else, about New Orleans, the sea, and many other things, but the movie is an attenuated folly. With Tilda Swinton. The amber-hued cinematography is by Claudio Miranda.—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

DOUBT
John Patrick Shanley adapts his own Broadway play for the screen, although moviegoers may feel that he hasn't adapted it enough. The year is 1964, the place is a Catholic school in the Bronx, and the problem is that Sister Aloysius (Meryl Streep), the resident dragon, is breathing fire. The particular target of her wrath is Father Flynn (Philip Seymour Hoffman), whom she suspects of having molested an altar boy. We are meant to see this as a solemn parable of belief—of its capacity both to grow without rational evidence and to fester without cause. Instead, we merely get to watch a pair of seasoned performers stage a demonstration match; this is won by Streep, of course, who comes across as a red-eyed compound of the Abbess from "The Sound of Music" and the Bride of Frankenstein. Stuck in between them, in the thankless role of umpire, is the kindly Sister James (Amy Adams), who doesn't stand a chance. The result is at once

humorless and risible; one small nudge, and it could have toppled over into camp.—*A.L.* (12/15/08) (In wide release.)

FOUR CHRISTMASES

Talented actors left to run on autopilot can't enliven this schematic seasonal romantic comedy's predictable servings of high jinks and sentiment. Vince Vaughn and Reese Witherspoon star as Brad and Kate, a fun-loving bourgeois couple from San Francisco who are resistant to marriage and other obligations. When a cancelled flight thwarts their planned holiday escape to Fiji, they get stuck doing a Christmas Day round of their divorced parents' quartet of homes, and the resulting chaos reveals unsuspected fault lines in their relationship. The tone fluctuates between forced uproar and soft soap, the stars have little chemistry, and the fine supporting cast (including Robert Duvall and Sissy Spacek, as Brad's parents, and Mary Steenburgen and Jon Voight, as Kate's) isn't given any solid footing. But one brief sequence of visual comedy, a pure, mechanistic slapstick number worthy of Mack Sennett, may have you laughing so hard you'll miss half of it, and Patrick Van Horn does a good turn as Brad's onetime best friend, who is now his mother's boyfriend. Directed by Seth Gordon.—*Richard Brody* (In wide release.)

FROST/NIXON

In its transfer from stage to film, Peter Morgan's account of David Frost's lengthy set of interviews with Richard Nixon in 1977, three years after he resigned the Presidency, has taken on an aura of momentousness unwarranted by the event itself. Frank Langella's performance provides considerable insights into Nixon's intelligence, caginess, and fraudulent sentimentality, and Michael Sheen makes Frost into a toothy, bright, shallow but smart showman-journalist. The interviews themselves, always absorbing, build to Nixon's climactic admission that he let the country down during the Watergate crisis. The media whirl of negotiation, advisers, preparation, and so on is engaging enough, but the episode itself changed nothing. It was a journalistic coup, not a historical milestone, and the filmmakers don't seem to realize that. Directed by Ron Howard.—*D.D.* (12/8/08) (In wide release.)

GRAN TORINO

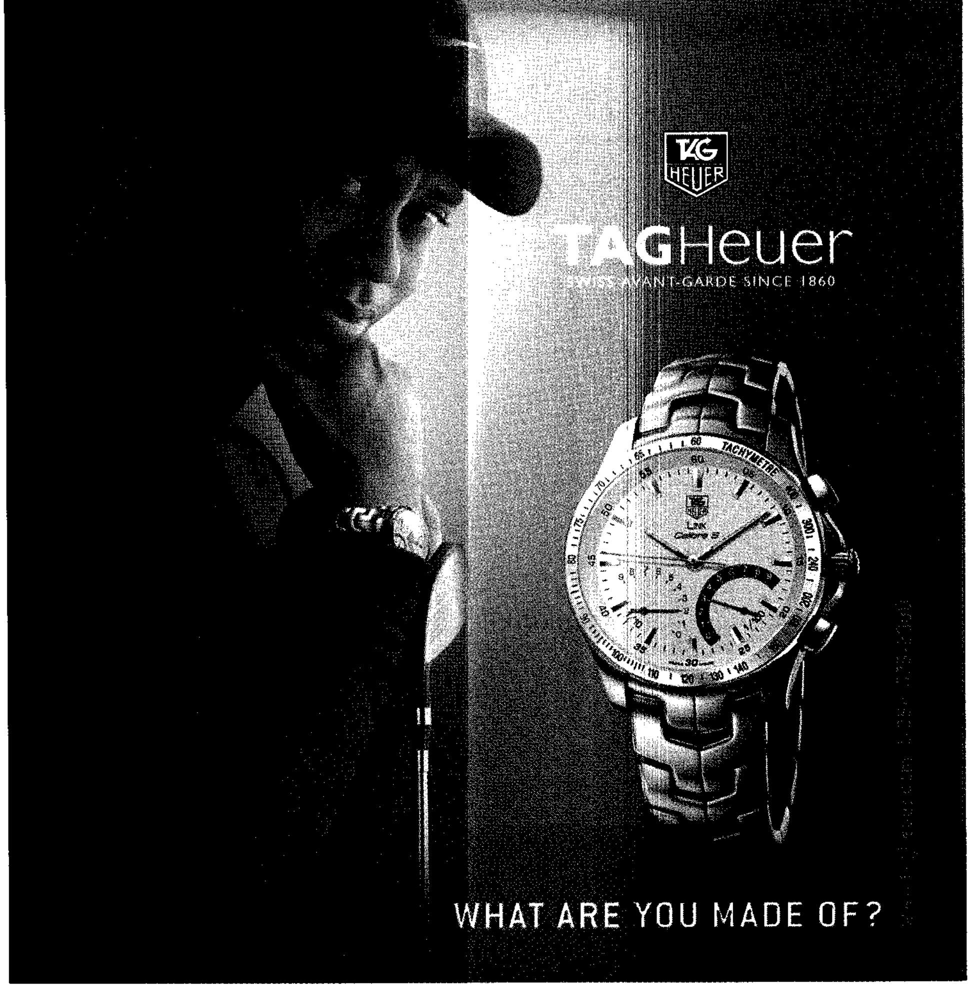
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. (In wide release.)

MILK

Gus Van Sant's vibrantly entertaining bio-pic re-creates, without starchiness, the San Francisco life of the gay activist and politician Harvey Milk (Sean Penn), who was assassinated in 1978, along with Mayor George Moscone, by a fellow-politician, the family-values conservative Dan White (Josh Brolin). The righteous march of events is warmed by the banter, the casual sex, and the candor of the gay milieu in the giddy seventies, the period just before AIDS, when life was free and easy. Much of the time, Penn keeps his voice down, but the fervor and humor are there in the most offhanded moments. Without ostentation, he creates a new body, a new temperament: he loosens his neck and shoulders and swivels his head; his smile is enormous and all-embracing; he holds an elbow out and pumps a forearm up and down like a semaphore as Harvey speaks in public. Josh Brolin, a slab of hair lying low across his forehead, gives White a brick-headed, baffled manner, a tormented neediness. In the filmmakers' interpretation, there's a suggestion that White suffered from murderously repressed homosexuality. With James Franco, Emile Hirsch, Diego Luna, and Alison Pill.—*D.D.* (12/1/08) (In limited release.)

POLICE

A convict, upon his release from prison, is fleeced by a pickpocket disguised as a clergyman. Finding himself homeless and penniless, the freed man meets up with a former cell mate and agrees to join him in a burglary, but their break-in quickly goes awry when the police show up. Since the movie is directed by, and stars, Charlie Chaplin, it's a slapstick comedy, but the graceful gags and antic glee do little to lessen the air of desperation and injustice. When this featurette was made, in 1916, Chaplin was already a celebrity; as the film shows, he was also already a great director, the equal of such il-



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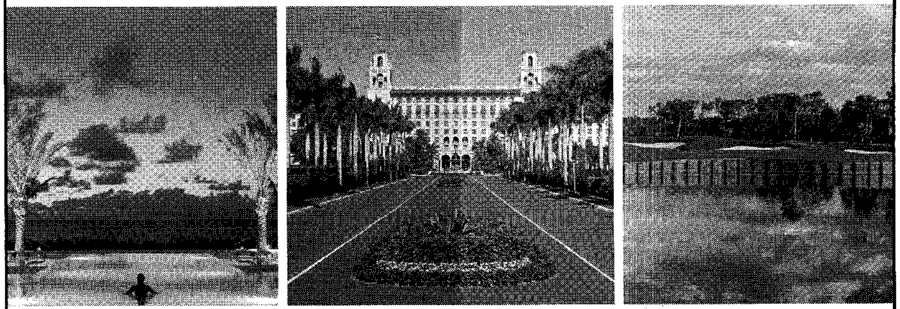

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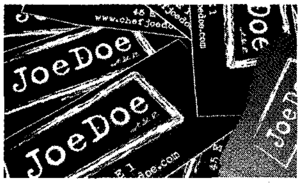
lustrious contemporaries as Griffith and Feuillade. Such visual wonders as the amazing shadow-play of the two robbers' silhouettes against a wall, the gleam of an officer's six-pointed star in a doorway's darkness, intense closeups featuring a moving camera and an iris-in, and a series of remarkably modern deep-focus shots all contribute psychological depth to a comedic sketch of novelistic scope. Satirizing social order with anarchic fury, Chaplin wraps his tale in a proto-Brechtian show-me-the-money realism. His moral profundity is crystallized in the Little Tramp, nature's nobleman, and the film's concluding Christian symbolism suggests the archetypal force that made this character the primordial icon of the twentieth century and of the cinema itself. Silent.—*R.B.* (Anthology Film Archives; Dec. 21.)

TABLES FOR TWO
JOEDOE



45 E. 1st St. (212-780-0262)—Much about this restaurant is small: the space (about thirty seats); the font on the menus (a magnifying glass might be useful); the kitchen (wedged into a corner and open to the dining room); and the snapshots lining the wall (two-by-three childhood photographs of the owners, Joe Dobias, who is also the chef, and Jill Schulster). Even the speakers, high on the wall, are teeny, though the music—Dave Matthews Band, Bob Marley—comes out big (often too big; one evening, Dobias and Schulster had a vigorous debate about whether when the volume was just right for the kitchen it might be too loud for the dining room). The number of diners, too, is often on the low side, particularly when you look down the street to the ever-popular Prune, where, on a recent rainy Sunday morning, a crowd huddled under its awning for an hour or more.

It's not an easy thing to take on the territory of such an established spot, particularly when you are dealing in much the same stock: simple American, with emphasis on the whole animal. But, to Dobias's credit, the biggest thing about the place is its flavors. (Closely followed by its portions.) A liver-bacon-and-onion sandwich, listed as an appetizer, was luscious and comforting, and large enough for a hearty meal, as was the Beets & Butt, in which the butt (pork, beautifully braised) easily outweighed the beets, and a dollop of marrow butter gave it all a rich sheen. Dishes can be both satisfying and discomfiting: the stuffed rice ball, baseball-size, fried, and sunk in marinara sauce, was addictive, if reminiscent of a mozzarella stick. The sweet-potato gnocchi, with sautéed apples and a pert apple slaw, had the incongruous addition of a fried egg. The Manx Station beef was nicely seasoned but needlessly topped with a tangle of tortilla strips.

Aspirations, unfortunately, can't guarantee success, and it seems doubtful that JoeDoe—with somewhat dutiful renditions of French toast and omelettes, and a disappointing chilaquiles—will pose any significant challenge to the Prune brunch juggernaut. But the restaurant's intimacy means that a table's verdict on their meal can be easily overheard. After dinner the other night, it was a little sentence and a big compliment: "That was fantastic." (Open weekdays for dinner and weekends for brunch and dinner. Entrées $20-$30.)

—*Andrea Thompson*

QUANTUM OF SOLACE

The twenty-second James Bond film is a strange affair. The hero is still hopping the globe in the quest to unravel a mysterious organization, as he used to do in the days of SMERSH. The difference, these days, is that none of it, not even the hopping, seems like fun. In the role of 007, Daniel Craig is brutish, joyless, and obsessive; you can't take your eyes off him, but you wonder if the punishment that he metes out is really directed at himself. He doesn't eat, he drinks to kill pain, and he manages to spend half the movie in the company of the ravishing Camille (Olga Kurylenko) without getting anywhere near a bed. His official mission is to pursue Dominic Greene (Mathieu Amalric), who is—wait for it—fast becoming a leading figure in South American water-storage circles. But the real mission, nurtured in Bond's wounded heart, is to avenge the death of Vesper Lynd, who won his love in "Casino Royale." The director, Marc Forster, whips us from one savage set piece to the next, regardless of logical connection, and the result can be read as the toughest and most expensive art-house film of the year. With Gemma Arterton, who lights up the action, all too briefly, as a fellow British spy.—*A.L.* (11/17/08) (In wide release.)

THE READER

The British director Stephen Daldry made a splash with "The Hours," and this new film is no less worthy, ambitious, and exasperating. The screenwriter, once again, is David Hare, who fillets the bestselling novel by Bernhard Schlink. For all Hare's expertise, however, we are stuck with the unsavory pretensions of the original tale. Kate Winslet plays Hanna, who, thirteen years after the Second World War, works on the trams in Neustadt, West Germany, and has occasional sex with a local teen-age boy named Michael (David Kross). Their first time, though lingeringly shot, has all the finesse of cheap porno; where else does a woman tell a lusty youth to shed his clothes and take a bath because he has dirt on his face? In the movie's second half, we see Hanna being tried and imprisoned for her wartime deeds; there is a shocking revelation, which comes as no surprise; and the middle-aged Michael (Ralph Fiennes) turns up to help his onetime love. Daldry takes things painfully slowly, not helped by a sappy score, and we are encouraged to muse upon the cultural shortcomings, or improvements, in the life of an aging member of the S.S. This is not an issue that most of us feel the need to worry about. With a strong performance, late in the day, from Lena Olin.—*A.L.* (12/15/08) (In wide release.)

SARABAND

In Ingmar Bergman's last film, from 2003, Liv Ullmann and Erland Josephson reprise their roles from the director's 1973 "Scenes from a Marriage." Marianne, a sixty-three-year-old lawyer, drops in on her ex-husband, Johan, an eighty-six-year-old scholar living in rural isolation, whom she has not seen in thirty-two years. Nostalgia quickly dissipates as Marianne is drawn into Johan's titanic clash with his son from his prior marriage, Henrik (Börje Ahlstedt), a widowed music professor, whose possessive plans for his teen-age daughter, Karin (Julia Dufvenius), lay bare decades of buried resentments. Johan, an egomaniacal monster whose great charm derives from the force of his unyielding will, might live and laugh mockingly forever—always at the expense of those who are, somehow, drawn to his strength and subjected to his brutality. Self-loathing, incurable regret, fear of death, pent-up hatred, and the holy terror of intimacy emerge white-hot; at times, the raw power of the emotions is almost unbearable. Bergman employs obvious theatrical devices that both mask and convey a lifetime of bitter wisdom. In Swedish.—*R.B.* (IFC Center; Dec. 26-28.)

SCOTT WALKER: 30 CENTURY MAN

The singer and songwriter Scott Walker was one-third of the sixties British pop group the Walker Brothers, who were not British, not brothers, and not really named Walker (Scott was born in Ohio, as Noel Scott Engel). After rising to fame with hits such as "The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore," the group disbanded, and Scott Walker went on to become an archetypal cult artist, an increasingly avant-garde performer known for his sepulchral vocals and equally dark taste in material. This documentary, directed by Stephen Kijak, takes a relatively straightforward approach to a particularly evasive talent: such stars as Brian Eno, Sting, Lulu, Ute Lemper, and David Bowie (who served as the film's executive producer) discuss Walker and his influence while archival footage and stills flash onscreen. The film skirts certain unpleasant aspects of Walker's life (his problems with alcohol, for example) and focusses mainly on his work, a decision probably motivated by the director's access to recording sessions for Walker's most recent album, "The Drift." (The faint of heart may be put off by the sight of Walker capturing the sound of a man slapping raw meat for use as percussion.) What is most revelatory, finally, is Kijak's interview with the reclusive artist himself, who is articulate, earnest, and refreshingly devoid of self-mythologizing gloom.—*Ben Greenman* (IFC Center.)

SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE

An eighteen-year-old Muslim tea-boy named Jamal (Dev Patel), born and raised in the poverty of Mumbai, teeters on the verge of fame and fortune. A nation awaits. Such is the old-fashioned, sentimental cliffhanger to which the screenwriter Simon Beaufoy and the director Danny Boyle have, with unembarrassed drive, committed themselves. Jamal is a contestant on the Indian edition of "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?," and the suspicion of the police—who, in an ill-judged prelude to the story, hold and torture him—is that he must have cheated. His response is that experience alone, whether wretched or comic, has by chance furnished him with the correct answers, and the bulk of the film, constructed from flashbacks, proves his point. The style, seen previously in "City of God" and other movies, is what you might call urban-manic: heated performances, even hotter colors, and camerawork that vies with the editing for nerve and speed. The lad at the center of it all is actually on the dull side, but the energy around him—not least in the dance sequence over the final credits—is difficult to resist.—*A.L.* (11/24/08) (In wide release.)

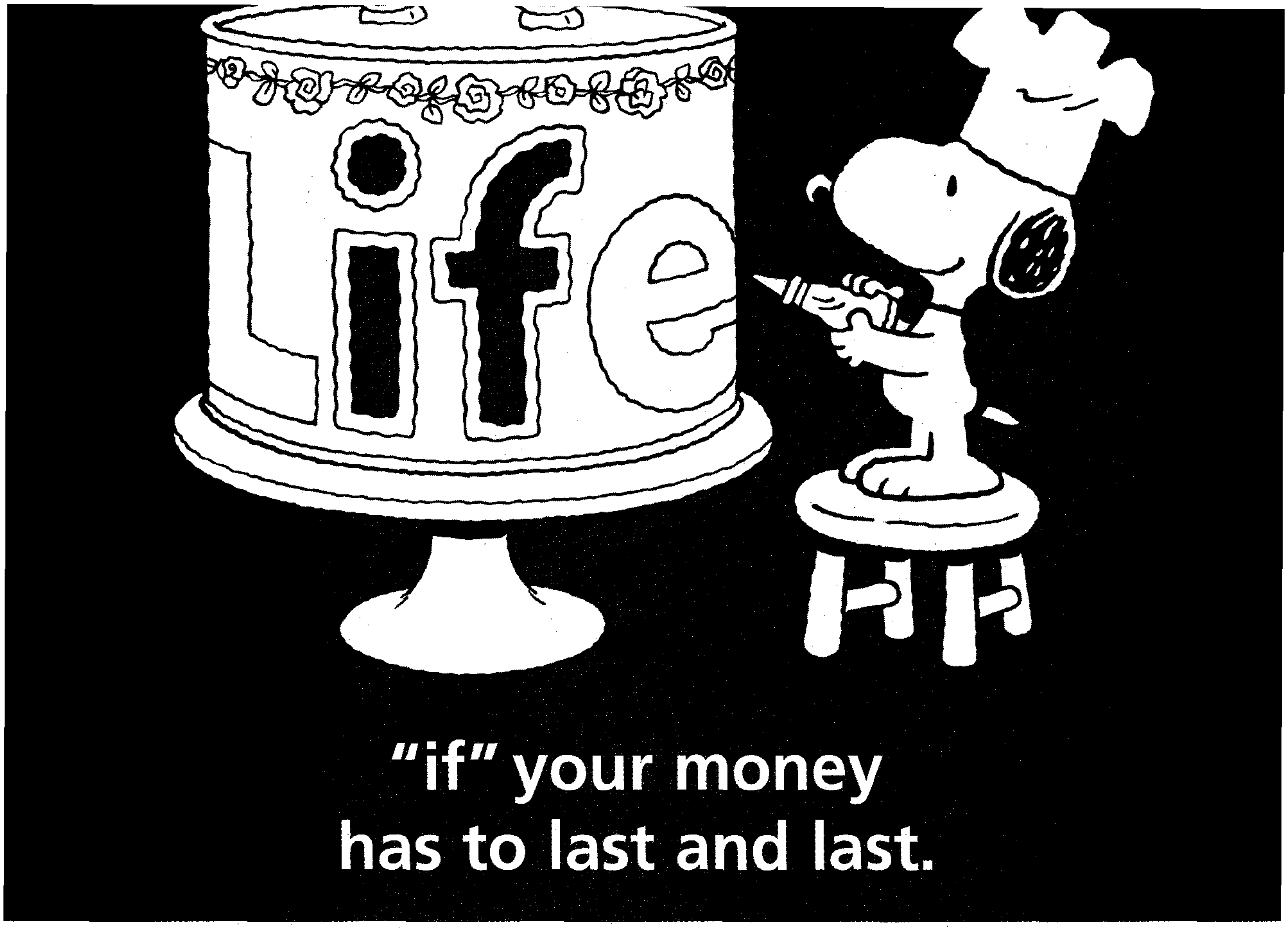
TWILIGHT

Isabella Swan (Kristen Stewart), a lovely, slender, self-possessed high-school junior, moves to a new school in rainy Washington State and sees a tall, inordinately pale boy, Edward Cullen (the square-jawed Robert Pattinson), glowering at her in despair. He wants her, but he cannot give way to desire. Edward, it turns out, is a vampire, but a very moral one, thirsty yet ascetic; he will drink only animal blood, he tells her, and she falls completely in love with him. In some ways, the scrupulous young man is an ideal lover: after all, many teen-age girls don't want intercourse; they want romance, and here is a boy with superhuman powers who is nevertheless sweet to his girl and protects her from harm without demanding anything in return but the chance to adore her. The director, Catherine Hardwicke ("Thirteen"), oversees some special effects that look a little cheesy, though the sunless Northwest, thick with mountain forests, is gloomily magnificent. Much of the time, Hardwicke keeps the camera close to the chaste lovers. For teens, it's blissful madness—an abstinence fable that's sexier than sex.—*D.D.* (12/1/08) (In wide release.)

WENDY AND LUCY

A young woman named Wendy (Michelle Williams) arrives in Oregon with a car, a dog, a map, and not much else. When the car breaks down, so does her plan to get to Alaska and start her life afresh. Kelly Reichardt's serene and cautious movie tracks her heroine around town, feeling its way along the margins of society, and noting both the brush-offs and the minor acts of charity that greet a person in need. Single incidents, such as the attempt to steal a few cans

NATALIE MATUTSCHOVSKY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of dog food, ripple outward into larger changes, and the most unglamourous spots, like the rest room at a gas station, acquire the consolation of a refuge. With her cap of black hair and bandaged ankle, Williams comes close at times to a wounded blankness, and she cracks only a couple of smiles, as if wary of more flagrant emotions; the hesitant friendship she forges with a Walgreens security guard (Walter Dalton) is the strongest bond in the film. What rescues it from tedium is the work of Sam Levy, the director of photography, who finds a formal, unhurried beauty in the storefronts and train yards of Portland, seeking out those patches of America where too many recent movies fear to tread.—*A.L.* (Film Forum.)

WHEN THE CLOUDS ROLL BY
Victor Fleming's directorial début is a comic masterpiece that showcases Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., at his most inventive and exuberant. He plays Daniel Boone Brown, the victim of Dr. Ulrich Metz (Herbert Grimwood), a depraved psychiatrist-neurologist who wants to prove how easily psychological tricks can destroy an ordinary man. Knowing that Daniel harbors self-destructive superstitions, the mad doctor mercilessly augments them by prescribing awful diets and sabotaging every aspect of the young fellow's existence, including his apartment's plumbing. Kathleen Clifford is delightful as the hero's love interest, an equally superstitious beauty from Oklahoma. The scenario neatly enfolds an oil scam and an oily boyfriend from back home; the need to avert these twin dangers rouses Daniel back to reality. The movie boasts a tremendous nightmare sequence, in which Fairbanks gets chased by a four-course dinner of onions, lobster, Welsh rabbit, and mince pie. Actors impersonate the foods, and Fleming uses slow motion and other optical and physical special effects to achieve an antic American surrealism comparable to Buster Keaton's. Silent.—*Michael Sragow* (MOMA; Dec. 22 and Dec. 29.)

THE WRESTLER
A straightforward tale, given tremendous extra punch by its leading man. Mickey Rourke, whose career was long ago laid to rest, rises again to play Randy (the Ram) Robinson, a wrestler whose own career has tumbled from a high of twenty years before. No one else, it seems fair to say, could have played the part; for one thing, no one but Rourke combines a gently spoken sweetness with so glazed and inflated a physique, together with a willingness to be treated by his peers like a veal chop. The scenes in the ring, in which Randy, despite a heart attack, struggles to prolong the dregs of his appeal, are often hard to take; but even more agonizing are his attempts to forge enduring bonds with his estranged daughter (Evan Rachel Wood) and a tired stripper (Marisa Tomei). The film has a grainy, bloodied sadness that slips at times into the sentimental; but the director, Darren Aronofsky, knows precisely where the heart of the story beats, and that confidence is a refreshing change after the drippy meanderings of his previous film, "The Fountain." There is nothing less mystical, or more moving, than to watch the Ram reduced to serving at a deli counter: a good man at the end of the line.—*A.L.* (12/15/08) (In wide release.)

Also Playing

ADAM RESURRECTED: Quad Cinema. **DARK STREETS:** In wide release. **THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL:** In wide release. **NOBEL SON:** In wide release.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—"Essential Cinema." Dec. 20 at 5: Short-film program, including "Un Chien Andalou" (1928, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dali; silent). ♦ Dec. 21 at 4: Short silent films by Charlie Chaplin, including "Dough and Dynamite" (1914). ♦ Dec. 21 at 4:30: "The Gold Rush" (1925, Chaplin; silent). ♦ Dec. 21 at 6: Short silent films by Chaplin, including "Police" (†). ♦ Dec. 21 at 8: Short silent films by Chaplin, including "The Idle Class" (1921). ♦ Dec. 21 at 6:30: "Los Olvidados" (1950, Buñuel; in Spanish). ♦ Dec. 21 at 8:30: "L'Âge d'Or" (1930, Buñuel and Dalí; in French).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—In revival. Dec. 17-18 at 4:30, 6, 7:45, and 9:30: "The Firemen's Ball" (1967, Milos Forman, in Czech).

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—In revival. Dec. 17 and Dec. 19 at 2, 4:30, 7, and 9:50; Dec. 18, Dec. 20-21, and Dec. 23 at 2, 4:30, 7, and 9:30; and Dec. 22 at 2 and 4:30: "Mishima" (1985, Paul Schrader). ♦ Dec. 22 at 7: "Baby Doll" (1956, Elia Kazan), followed by a discussion with the film's co-stars, Carroll Baker and Eli Wallach. ♦ Holiday matinées. Dec. 24-Jan. 1 at 1: "Hoppity Goes to Town" (1941, Max Fleischer). ♦ Through Jan. 1: The films of Preston Sturges. Dec. 24-25 at 2:45, 6, and 9:15: "Christmas in July" (1940). ♦ Dec. 24-25 at 4:10 and 7:25: "Remember the Night" (1940, Mitchell Leisen). ♦ Dec. 26-27 at 2:40, 6:05, and 9:30: "Sullivan's Travels" (1941). ♦ Dec. 26-27 at 4:30 and 7:55: "The Great McGinty" (1940). ♦ Dec. 28-29 at 2:40, 6:30, and 10:20: "The Miracle of Morgan's Creek" (1944). ♦ Dec. 28-29 at 4:35 and 8:25: "Hail the Conquering Hero" (1944). ♦ Dec. 30 at 2:40, 6:20, and 10: "Easy Living" (1937, Mitchell Leisen). ♦ Dec. 30 at 4:20 and 8: "Unfaithfully Yours" (1948).

IFC CENTER
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—In revival. Dec. 19-25 (call for showtimes): "It's a Wonderful Life" (1946, Frank Capra). ♦ The films of Ingmar Bergman. Dec. 19-21 at 11 A.M.: "Autumn Sonata" (1978; in Swedish). ♦ Dec. 26-28 at 11 A.M.: "Saraband" (†). ♦ "Waverly Midnights." Dec. 19-20: "Gremlins" (1984, Joe Dante). ♦ Dec. 26-27: "A Nightmare on Elm Street" (1984, Wes Craven).

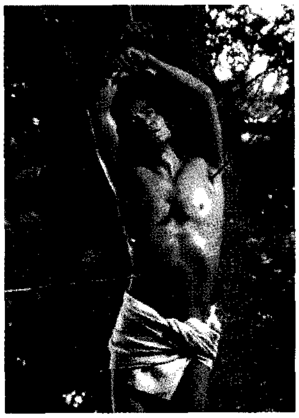
MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—The films of Agnieszka Holland. Dec. 19 at 6: "Sunday Children" (1976; in Polish). ♦ Dec. 19 at 7:45: "Evening with Abdon" (1975; in Polish). ♦ Dec. 20 at 7: "A Girl Like Me: The Gwen Araujo Story" (2006). ♦ Dec. 21 at 2 and Dec. 27 at 4: "Washington Square" (1997). ♦ Dec. 21 at 5 and Dec. 27 at 1: "The Secret Garden" (1993). ♦ Dec. 22 at 8:30 and Dec. 27 at 7: "Dybuk" (2000; in Polish). ♦ Dec. 26 at 6: "Shot in the Heart" (2001). ♦ Dec. 26 at 8:30: "Provincial Actors" (1978; in Polish). ♦ Dec. 28 at 2: "A Lonely Woman" (1981; in Polish). ♦ Dec. 28 at 4:30: Episodes of "The Wire" (2004-08). ♦ Dec. 29 at 6 and Dec. 30 at 8:30: "Fever" (1981; in Polish). ♦ Dec. 29 at 8:30 and Dec. 30 at 6: "Prime Minister" (2007, Holland, Kasia Adamik, and Magdalena Lazarkiewicz; in Polish). ♦ The films of Douglas Fairbanks. All films are silent. Dec. 17 at 6 and Dec. 28 at 2: "The Gaucho" (1928, Richard Jones). ♦ Dec. 18 at 8 and Dec. 27 at 12:30: "The Mark of Zorro" (1920, Fred Niblo). ♦ Dec. 19 at 4:30 and Dec. 29 at 6: "A Modern Musketeer" (1917, Allan Dwan). ♦ Dec. 20 at noon and Dec. 28 at 5: "Wild and Woolly" (1917, John Emerson). ♦ Dec. 22 at 6 and Dec. 29 at 7:30: "When the Clouds Roll By" (†). ♦ Dec. 22 at 8: "The Mollycoddle" (1920, Victor Fleming). ♦ Dec. 27 at 2:30 and Dec. 30 at 7: "Don Q, Son of Zorro" (1925, Donald Crisp). ♦ "Batiste Madalena and the Cinema of the 1920s." Dec. 26 at 6: "Shivering Spooks" (1926, Robert F. McGowan; silent). ♦ Dec. 26 at 8:30: "Two Tars" (1928, James Parrott; silent). ♦ Dec. 27 at 7: "The Lost World" (1925, Harry O. Hoyt; silent). ♦ Special screening. Dec. 27 at 4:45: "Blithe Spirit" (1945, David Lean).

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—"Cabaret Cinema." Dec. 19 at 9:30: "Dolls" (2002, Takeshi Kitano; in Japanese). ♦ Dec. 26 at 9:30: "Some Like It Hot" (1959, Billy Wilder).

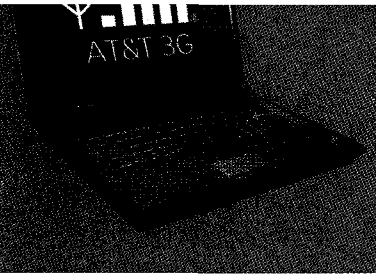
WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5610)—Special screenings. Dec. 18 at 2 and 6:30: "The Eleanor Roosevelt Story" (1965, Richard Kaplan). ♦ The films of Martin Scorsese. Dec. 26 at 2 and Dec. 29 at 7:15: "Who's That Knocking at My Door" (1967). ♦ Dec. 26 at 3:50 and Dec. 30 at 5:30: "Mean Streets" (1973). ♦ Dec. 26 at 6:15 and Dec. 29 at 9:10: "Raging Bull" (1980). ♦ Dec. 26 at 8:45, Dec. 27 at 5:30, and Dec. 29 at 4:20: "Goodfellas" (1990). ♦ Dec. 27 at 1 and Dec. 28 at 9: "Taxi

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
WAY OUT EAST

What is more delectable, in the chronicles of the major studios, than the rogue movie that slips beneath the radar? To be exact: what was the expression on the faces of Warner Bros. executives when they first saw "Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters," on its release in 1985? Paul Schrader's study of the Japanese author Yukio Mishima, starring Ken Ogata in the title role, and showing again at Film Forum Dec. 17-23, approaches its hero from three distinct angles. We get black-and-white flashbacks to his shy and stuttering childhood; richly hued dramatizations of scenes from Mishima novels; and, most compelling of all, a careful reconstruction of the day in 1970 when he occupied military headquarters in Tokyo, declaimed a farewell speech, and committed ritual suicide. Some directors might have been tempted into an overwrought treatment of these lurid themes; Schrader holds his nerve and creates his most formally disciplined work, its textures made more shimmering by the Philip Glass score. A final, enraptured flourish from the age of the Hollywood auteur.
—*Anthony Lane*



WARNER BROS. PICTURES/PHOTOFEST



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Driver" (1976). ♦ Dec. 27 and Dec. 30 at 3:15: "Italianamerican" (1974). ♦ Dec. 27 at 8:20 and Dec. 29 at 1: "Casino" (1995). ♦ Dec. 28 at 12 and Dec. 30 at 7:45: "No Direction Home" (2005). ♦ Dec. 28 at 3:45: "New York, New York" (1977). ♦ Dec. 28 at 6:45 and Dec. 30 at 1: "The King of Comedy" (1982).

READINGS AND TALKS

KGB BAR
A night of science fiction, with Christopher Barzak and Alaya Dawn Johnson. (85 E. 4th St. No tickets necessary. Dec. 17 at 7.)

POETRY PROJECT
Thirty years ago this month, Bernadette Mayer, a former director of the Poetry Project, wrote an epic poem about daily life, "Midwinter Day." On Dec. 17 at 8, Philip Good, Marie Warsh, Lewis Warsh, Barbara Epler, Jamey Jones, Peggy DeCoursey, Lee Ann Brown, Scott Satterwaite, Bill de Noyelles, and Brenda Coultas join Mayer in reading the entire work. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. Tickets at the door.)

92ND STREET Y
The poets Frank Bidart and David Kirby read from their work. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Dec. 18 at 8:15.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

NEW YORK NATIONAL BOAT SHOW
In addition to more than a thousand yachts, fishing boats, and other kinds of personal watercraft, this year's show features plenty of ancillary attractions; they include Twiggy the waterskiing squirrel and an exhibit on the forthcoming four hundredth anniversary of Henry Hudson's discovery of the river that bears his name. There will be a visit by boat builders from upstate New York who are hard at work on a replica of the Onrust, the first decked vessel to be constructed in the New World. Built by the Dutch explorer Adriaen Block five years after Hudson's visit, the fifty-foot-long shallow-draft ship was used to explore the inland waterways and coastal waters of New England. (Jacob K. Javits Convention Center, Eleventh Ave. between 34th and 39th Sts. For more information, call 212-984-7007. Through Dec. 21.)

"HOLIDAY HOUSE PARTY"
The ex-rocker and current wild-haired children's musician Dan Zanes celebrates the season onstage at the New Victory Theatre, where there's room for all of his globe-trotting musical friends. (209 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010. Dec. 19-Jan. 4.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES
The end of a challenging auction season is finally upon us, to the relief of many a weary auctioneer. **Sotheby's** closes with a busy week that begins with a sale of mostly Israeli art (Dec. 16), spanning and even predating the creation of Israel—as in the case of the sale's cover lot, Nachum Gutman's naïf, hopeful canvas "Tower of David, Jerusalem." The house holds two auctions of Judaica the following day (Dec. 17), the first of which offers a library of Hebrew books and manuscripts amassed over several decades by a resident of New York's Delmonico Hotel; the collection includes such prized lots as a magnificent Hebrew Bible, illuminated and handwritten in Florence in 1489. The final two sales, both on Dec. 18, offer elegant examples of twentieth-century design, starting with Tiffany creations and followed by a more general sale that includes everything from Wiener Werkstätte vases to a wrought-iron elevator screen designed by Louis Sullivan for the Chicago Stock Exchange, circa 1893. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ **Christie's** holds a three-part sale of photographs from the holdings of Leon and Michaela Constantiner (Dec. 16-17), a collection that illustrates an obsession with representations of glamour, celebrity, and desire—a large group of iconic photographs of Marilyn Monroe, the subject of a 2004-05 travelling exhibit, being a prime example. The sale also includes a substantial selection of photographs by Helmut Newton, as well as works by Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Herb Ritts. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) ♦ **Phillips** offers a sleek selection of twentieth- and twenty-first-century design objects (Dec. 17), from Mies van der Rohe tables to Marc Newson lights, in a sale that also features two groups of ceramics—sober, textural pieces by Hans Coper and Lucie Rie on the one hand and whimsical creations by Japanese artists such as Harumi Nakashima and Hiroaki (Taimei) Morino on the other. (450 W. 15th St. 212-940-1200.) ♦ Sensuous lines and rich colors remind us of gayer times at **Swann's** sale of Art Nouveau posters on Dec. 17. (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.)

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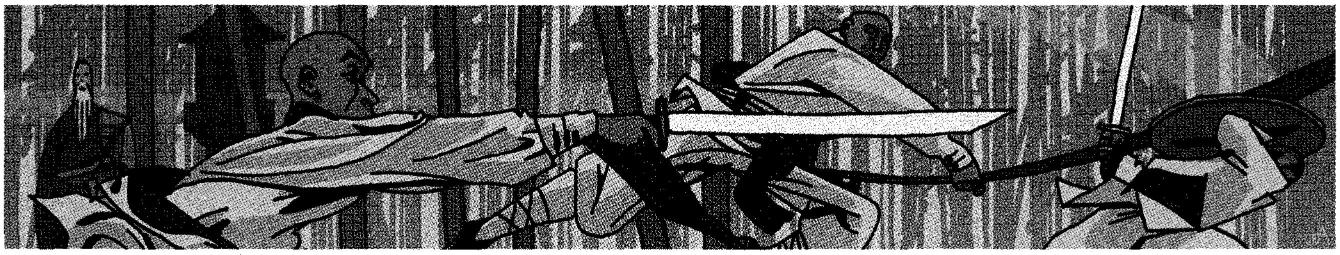
Visit the Goings On blog, at www.newyorker.com/go/goingson, for additional cultural coverage and commentary.



"Soul of Shaolin," at the Marquis.

JASHAR AWAN

ON THE HORIZON

THE THEATRE
KUNG-FU FIGHTING
Jan. 13

"Soul of Shaolin," at the Marquis, is the fruition of a new partnership between the Nederlander theatre chain and the Eastern Shanghai Cultural Film and Television Group. The show features performers schooled in Shaolin kung fu. (212-307-7171.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
HIGH WATER
Jan. 14

Venice, long threatened by floods, thrives on music and art. Members of the Venice Baroque Orchestra perform at Weill Recital Hall, along with a wonderful American mezzo-soprano, Vivica Genaux. (212-247-7800.)

MOVIES
RING IN THE NEW
Jan. 18-31

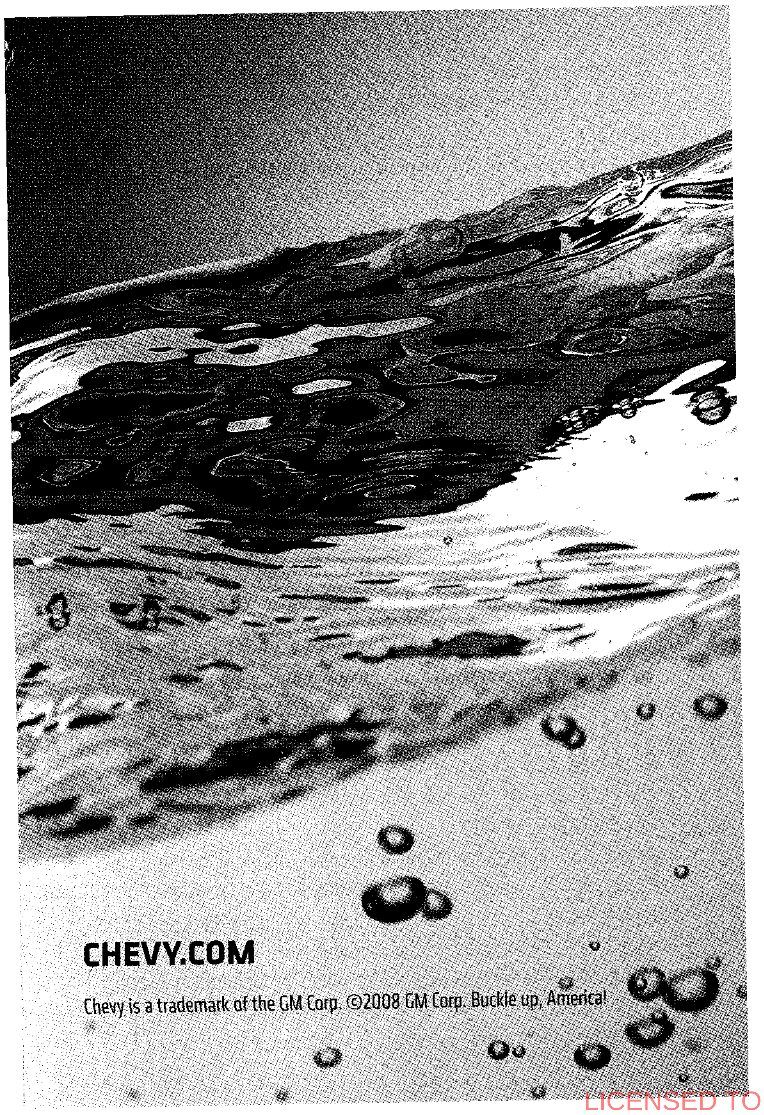
The inauguration of a new President also inaugurates a new character for movies to come. MOMA surveys seven decades of American political movies, including D. W. Griffith's "Abraham Lincoln," starring Walter Huston; John Ford's "Young Mr. Lincoln," starring Henry Fonda; the documentary "Primary," pitting John F. Kennedy against Hubert Humphrey; Otto Preminger's "Advise and Consent," and Alexander Payne's "Election." (212-708-9480.)

ART
LOCAL COLOR
Jan. 24-April 26

The Queens International, a biennial exhibition at the Queens Museum of work by artists based in the borough, spotlights emerging talent and alternative approaches. This year's edition features more than forty artists, including Alejandro Diaz, Yasue Maetake, and the collective Future Shock. (718-592-9700.)

NIGHT LIFE
BIG CANVAS
Feb. 27

Earlier this year, David Byrne released "Everything That Happens Will Happen Today," with his old collaborator the producer Brian Eno. It was their first album together in more than a quarter century. Byrne will bring songs from that release and his vast back catalogue to Radio City Music Hall. (212-307-7171.)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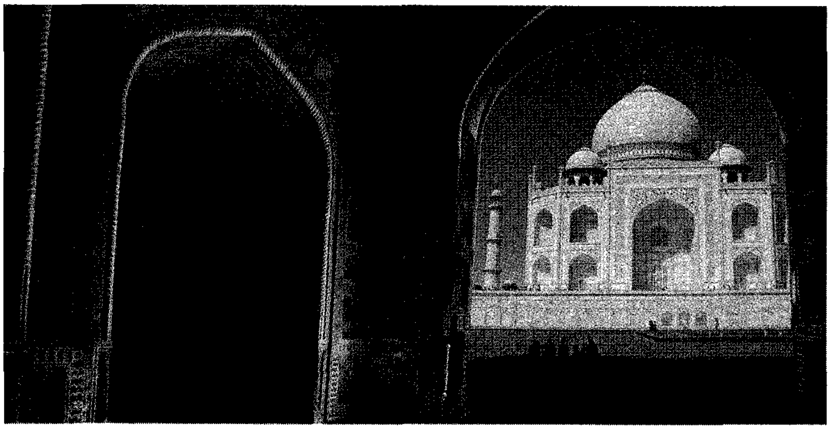
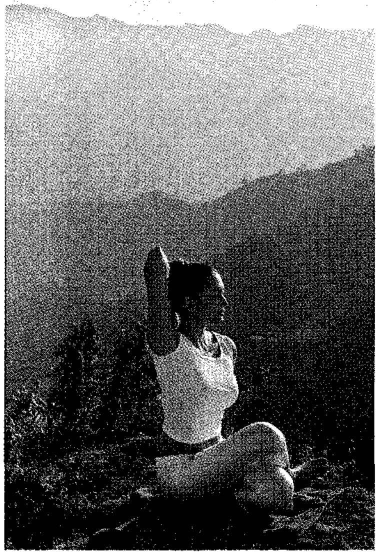
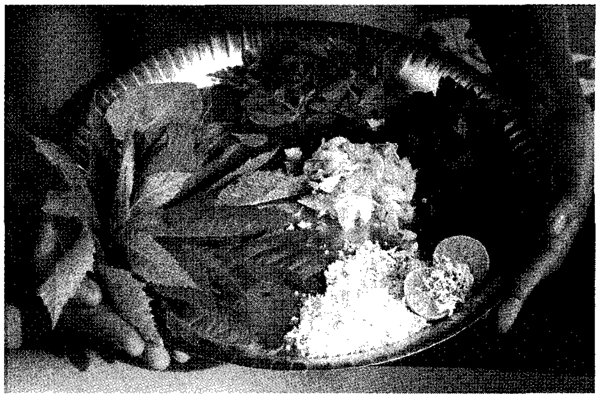




Destination: India
Authenticity, opulence, and a fusion of the traditional and modern. *Clockwise, far left:* the iconic Taj Mahal in Agra; the Gomukha-asana pose with an inspiring backdrop; and a presentation of herbal ingredients for an Ayurveda spa treatment.



TOP, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: TAJ MAHAL VIEW ©GETTY IMAGES/KEREN SU; YOGA POSE, COURTESY OF INDIA MINISTRY OF TOURISM; HERBAL INGREDIENTS ©LUCA TETTONI/CORBIS

SPIRIT OF INDIA
Transcendent Travel

WITH A GROWING INTEREST IN health and well-being, many travelers are seeking restorative respites, and the country that gave us meditation and mantras also abounds in a diversity of rejuvenative choices. India—whose civilization has spawned a wealth of alternative therapies to help achieve harmony of body, mind, and spirit—is attracting many such seekers who wish to practice asanas at an Indian yoga retreat, undergo holistic healing in a traditional Ayurvedic center, visit a resort spa in a serene locale, or de-stress in a cosmopolitan day spa. Indisputably, India sets the standard globally as a premier spiritual and healing destination.

PRACTICING YOGA

Conceived in India thousands of years ago as a way to guide individuals on a path to enlightenment, hatha yoga is not merely a philosophy or an exotic form of gymnastics. It's a way of life, thought to prepare the body for mastery of mind, taught in spiritual centers that offer single sessions and in-depth courses. The world's oldest organized yoga center, Mumbai's Yoga Institute, hosts specialized camps and workshops. Even modest hotels feature morning yoga sessions.

The holy town of Rishikesh, north of Delhi, has many ashrams and renowned gurus and is revered as the world's yoga capital. Situated on the Ganges, it is believed that meditation in Rishikesh leads to the attainment of salvation. Made famous when the Beatles came here in the nineteen-sixties, it is the site for International Yoga Week, celebrated in March.

ACHIEVING BALANCE

India's ancient science of healing, Ayurveda, consists of therapeutic treatments that include herbal medicine, yoga, deep massage, reflexology, lifestyle changes, and detoxification. Many of the leading Ayurvedic practitioners are located in the balmy coastal state of Kerala.

SEEKING SANCTUARY

Experience India's unique path to healthful living in these highly regarded facilities across the subcontinent:

KERALA

The Leela Kempinski Kovalam Beach [theleela.com] offers Ayurvedic programs ranging from one day to a month.

The Radisson's Maya Spa [radisson.com] is the largest spa in southern India. Fourteen rooms are dedicated to Ayurvedic and massage treatments; another section provides spa services such as stone therapy and other rejuvenation treatments.

RISHIKESH

Anānda in the Himalayas [anandaspa.com] is a spa built on a maharaja's estate that offers wellness retreats as well as Ayurveda, yoga, Reiki, and meditation.

Parmarth Niketan [parmarth.com] is a thousand-room mountaintop ashram. Programs focus on beginners' yoga.

ELSEWHERE IN INDIA

Aashyana Lakhanpal [aashyanalakhanpal.com], in Goa, is a private villa exuding tranquillity. It accommodates up to twenty-two guests wishing to follow a customized Ayurvedic program.

Aman Resorts [amanresorts.com] such as Aman-i-Khás and Amanbagh proffer healing therapies in luxe settings that include tented camps and private pool pavilions in northern India. Guided yoga and meditation sessions and Mehendi body painting heighten the experience.

Kaya Kalp [itcwelcomgroup.in] opened in Agra in March. This exquisite 99,000-square-foot day spa was quickly acclaimed "World's Best City Spa" by *Tatler* magazine.

Oberoi Amarvilās Spa [oberoihotels.com], in the Taj Mahal's shadow, features a three-day rejuvenating Ayurveda-and-yoga package.

Taj Hotels' luxurious Jiva Spas [tajhotels.com] inside Rambagh Palace in Jaipur, Fisherman's Cove in Chennai, and others promote yoga, holistic healing, meditation, and signature treatments in contemporary spaces.

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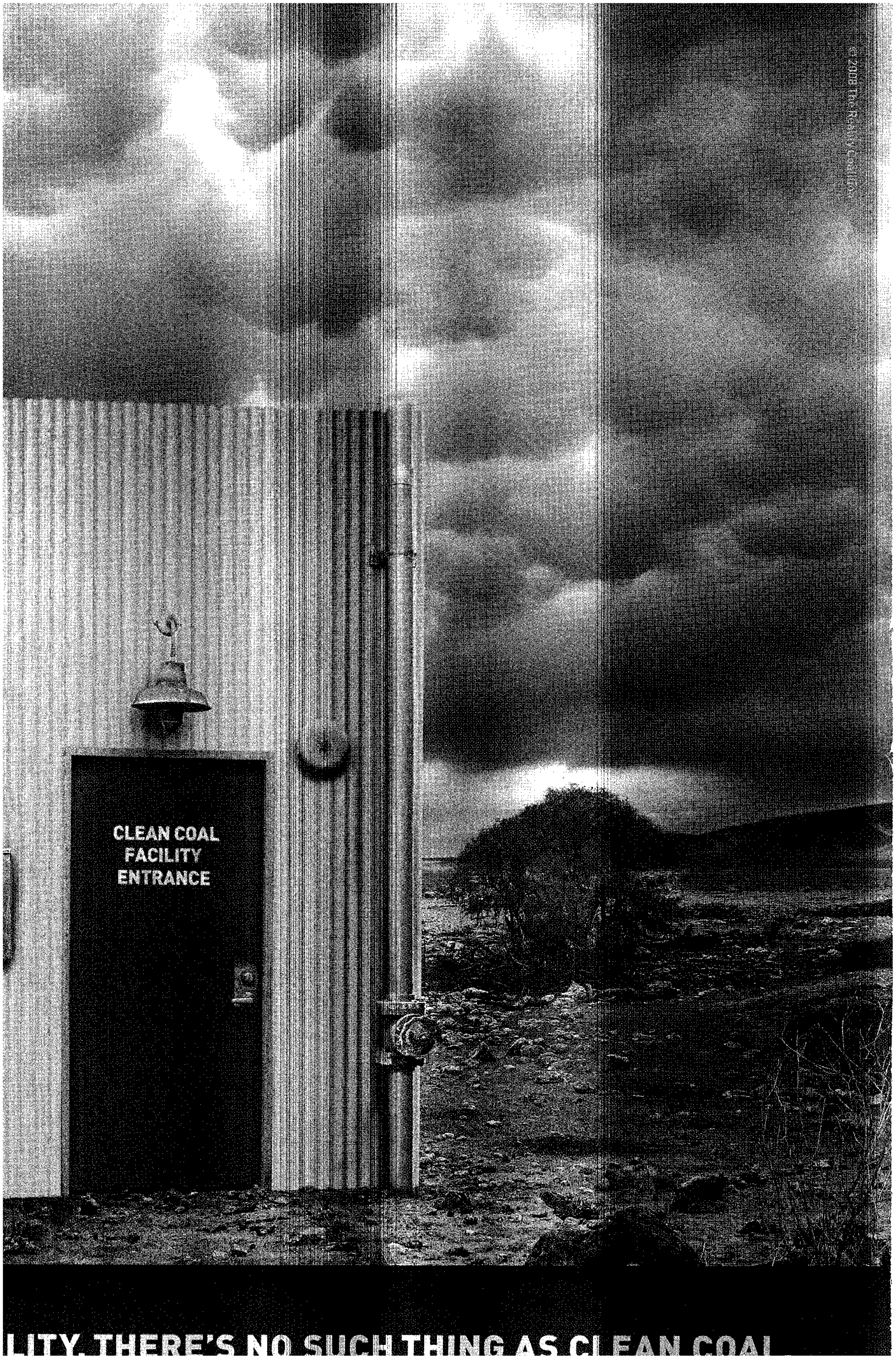
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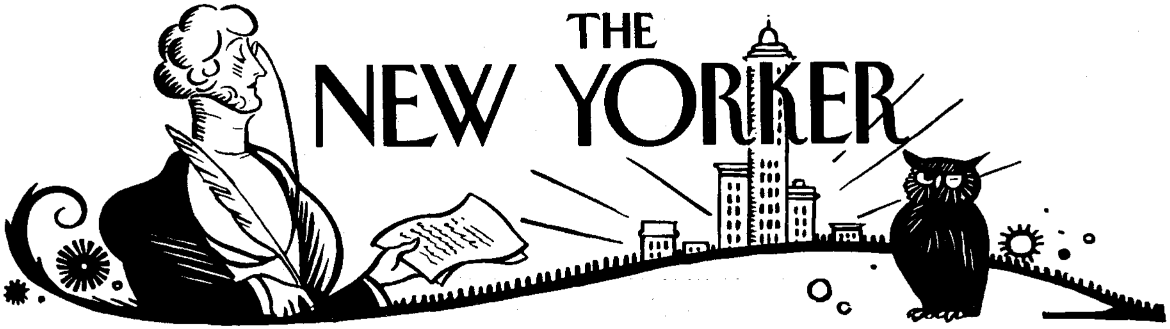
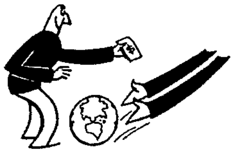


THE TALK OF THE TOWN

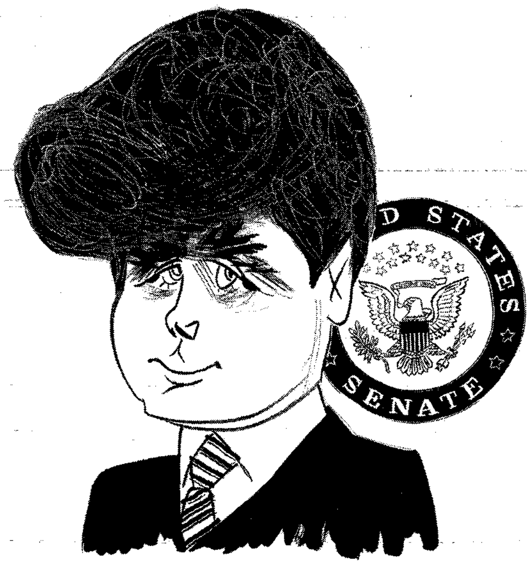
COMMENT
APPOINTMENTS



Lucky fellow, that Rod Blagojevich. The same history-making turn of events that had placed Barack Obama in line to become the forty-fourth President of the United States had handed Governor Blagojevich, Democrat of Illinois, a "golden" (his word) Christmas present: the power to name Obama's replacement in the Senate. The Governor's vote, unlike the average citizen's, would really, truly, definitively count. In a one-man, one-vote electorate, he would be the man and his would be the vote. Rod Blagojevich and nobody but Rod Blagojevich would get to pick the next United States senator from Illinois.

What did Blagojevich choose to do with this gift? He chose to auction it off. He didn't put it on eBay—no Sarah Palin he—but he did put it online. The line he put it on was a telephone line, and, unfortunately for him, the line was a party line, shared with Patrick Fitzgerald, the fearless United States Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois. As the criminal complaint that Fitzgerald's office filed last week shows, Blagojevich has been on a glide path to the penitentiary for most of the six years he has been governor. An F.B.I. affidavit, seventy-six pages long, describes such activities as threatening to rescind eight million dollars in state funds for a children's hospital because an executive neglected to give him a campaign contribution and trying to blackmail the Chicago *Tribune* into firing editorial writers who had displeased him. (So much for the cruel canard that nobody reads editorials.) Donning his press-ombudsman fedora, the Governor summed up his verbal op-ed: "Our recommendation is fire all those fucking people, get 'em the fuck out of there, and get us some editorial support."

For the Senate seat, Blagojevich set a heftier reserve price. In discussions with an adviser about what he might extract from an unnamed hopeful, he suggested a floor of half a million dollars in campaign funds "up front." He mused that if he let Obama make the pick the President-elect might come across with a Cabinet post or an ambassadorship in exchange. Or maybe Obama could get one of his rich buddies like Warren Buffett or Bill Gates to kick in "ten, fifteen, twenty million" to set up a foundation for Blagojevich to run (salary requirement: two hundred and fifty to three hundred grand per annum). Or maybe the Governor could barter the seat to union officials for a high-paying, high-visibility leadership position. A lucrative corporate-board seat for his wife—the Bonnie to his Clyde, judging from the transcripts—would be nice, too.



In all this, Blagojevich was just kicking up the latest cloud of dust on a well-worn Illinois path. His immediate gubernatorial predecessor, George Ryan, is currently doing six and a half years for racketeering and fraud. As of 2006, the last time the Chicago *Sun-Times* checked, at least seventy-nine current or former elected officials in Illinois had been convicted of a crime since 1972. As for Obama, though, the already ample evidence that he has taken a different route is buttressed by the Fitzgerald document. Blagojevich—who had remarked of the Senate seat, "I've got this thing and it's fucking golden, and, uh, uh, I'm just not giving it up for fuckin' nothing"—was not happy when told that no offers were forthcoming from anyone around "this motherfucker," as he referred to the President-elect: "Fuck him. For nothing? Fuck him."

Meanwhile, back in the sleepy, often law-abiding state of New York, Governor David Paterson, who owes his office to the (strictly private) bad

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

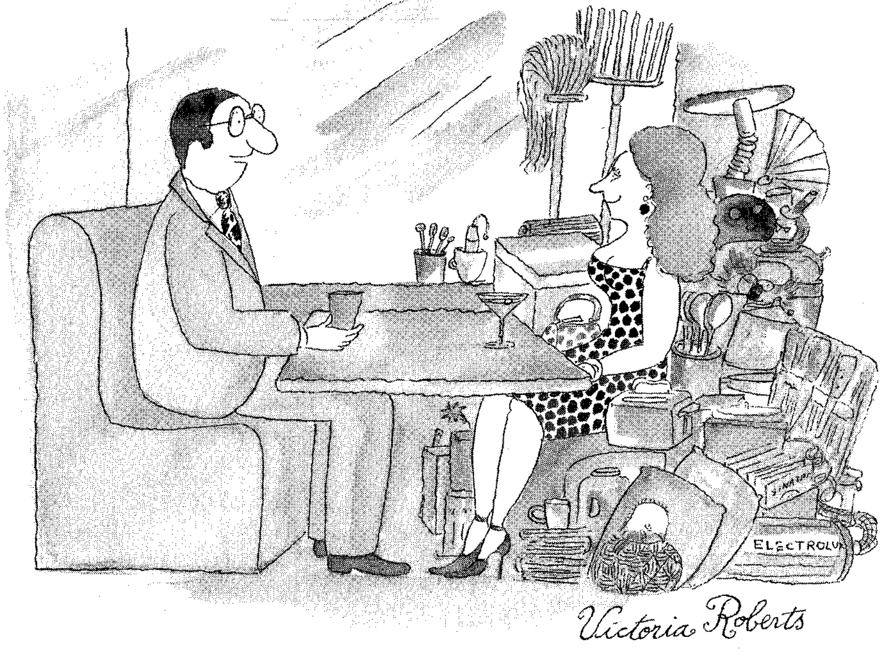
behavior of his predecessor, has been pondering whom to appoint to replace Senator Hillary Clinton, who plans to resign her seat once she is confirmed as Secretary of State. According to press reports, the list of possibilities under consideration is as strikingly unimaginative as if the choice were being made in the usual way—i.e., by the people, as mediated through and manipulated by party primaries, fund-raising prowess, non-stop polling, ethnic entitlement, and regional balancing. "Among the governor's inner circle, there is a desire to pick someone from upstate New York, since the region has no representation in statewide office," the *Times* reports. "A woman or a Latino would also be desirable." The current roster (with accompanying parochial concerns) includes at least three members of Congress (one female and upstate, one female and Hispanic, one just upstate), two city executives (one upstate, one Hispanic), one labor leader (the teachers' union), and two dynasts (one Cuomo, one Kennedy). The Cuomo is Andrew, the state's elected attorney general. The Kennedy—and the only choice on the list that qualifies as even marginally adventurous—is Caroline, a reticent and intelligent woman who made a splashy political début this year as a campaigner for Obama.

What if Governor Paterson, prompted by the squalor of his Illinois colleague's maneuverings, were to put aside mundane calculations and take full advantage of his theoretically unfettered freedom of choice? The Senate was originally conceived as a sort of chamber of notables, but most of its members, over the years, have been notable mainly for their mediocrity. New York is full of interesting people. Want some suggestions? Try these, collected from an informal canvass—a baker's dozen, in alphabetical order:

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, thoughtful and scholarly, would give the new President someone to shoot hoops with. Christiane Amanpour would be a slam dunk for the Foreign Relations Committee. The impossibly distinguished Vartan Gregorian is a one-man academy of arts, letters, and the humanities. Bill T. Jones, who doesn't need words to make a speech, would make C-SPAN 2 worth watching. A non-dynastic Kennedy, the novelist William, would give upstate New York representation of the first order. Paul Krugman would provide ornery economic smarts. Arthur Laurents, conveniently, is already in Washington, directing the National Theatre revival of his "West Side Story." If you doubt that Lou Reed knows politics, listen to his album "New York." Felix Rohatyn is as senatorial as you can get without wearing a toga. Ed Sanders—poet, Pentagon levitator, classics scholar, founding member of the Fugs—is a political force in Woodstock, New York. Toni Morrison's majestic voice would warm the Senate chamber. No one who ever spent the equivalent of two Senate terms in a complex, ceaselessly scrutinized job in New York has ever done it better than Joe Torre did as manager of the Yankees. Harold Varmus, the head of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and, like Morrison, a Nobel laureate, got lots of money from Congress for the National Institutes of Health when he ran them, during the nineteen-nineties. Perhaps he could do the same for New York—not that such petty considerations are worthy of this exercise.

All fantasy, of course. But not so fantastical as Rod Blagojevich's notion that a seat in the United States Senate was his for the selling.

—Hendrik Hertzberg



"You're not one of those hoarders, are you?"

GETTING AND SPENDING
BROWN BAGGERS

Receptacles usually have three purposes. They protect things. They make them easy to transport. They either draw attention to or conceal the items inside them, depending on what those items are, and how proud or guilty the person doing the carrying feels about them. A multitude of vices can be camouflaged with clever packaging: plain-paper wrappers for porn, the one-hitter disguised as a cigarette, a brown bag hiding a pint of whiskey. Practitioners of another sin of consumption—luxury shopping—tend toward blatancy, lugging old Tiffany bags around town to the point of disintegration, and using Christian Louboutin satchels for their gym clothes. But in these dismal days even big spenders want to look like they've come from a sample sale; the scheme is cruddy bags with nice stuff inside, instead of nice bags masking the crud within. At Prada, customers have been asking clerks to put their goods in unmarked bags, so as not to broadcast their purchase of a pocketbook, or a cashmere sweater, that costs a month's unemployment. If Santa has a sack, in 2008 it is probably a brown bag.

Ron Raznick, the president of R.T.R. Packaging, in the Flatiron district, which has for twenty years made shopping bags for such clients as Takashimaya, Ron Herman, and W Hotels, has noticed the

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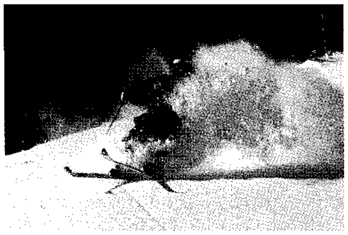

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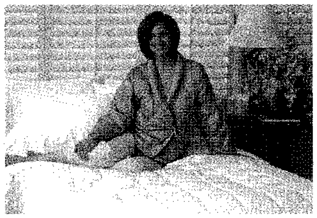

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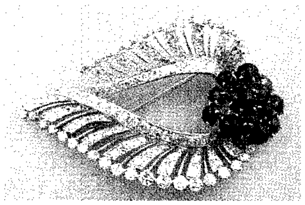

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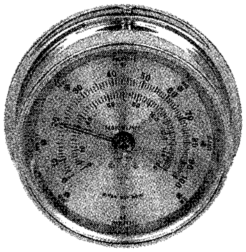

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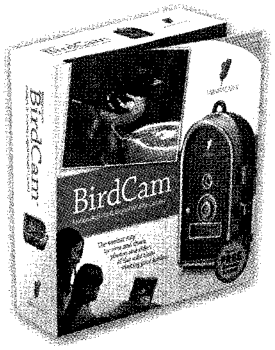


vogue for discreet packaging. He is calling it "inconspicuous chic." He has not experienced a decline in business owing to the recession, he said, the other day over the phone, but people are choosing "more classical stuff": embossing, UV coding, thick stock. "It's like there's two types of women," he said. "There's, like, a blond girl that might have great big, whatever, features, but there's a lady who'd look really classy and wear a black dress that's elegant, but still look sexy—we're doing more like that." (Does that make Forever 21, whose bright-yellow plastic bags have a tiny "John 3:16" printed on the underside, a redhead?) Shopping bags with rhinestones, or shopping bags treated to look like patent leather, are not in favor right now; recyclable ones, and those made in natural fibres, are. If Anya Hindmarch, who created a sensation last year with her canvas totes imprinted with "I'm Not a Plastic Bag," were to attempt to capitalize on the recent mood on Fifth Avenue, she might do well with "I'm Not a Bag from an Expensive Store."

Hemlines are supposed to fall in recessions; shopping bags apparently turn monochromatic. Raznick recalled having shown a boutique owner some prototypes: reusable jelly bags, beach-style totes. "She goes, 'I love this stuff, don't get me wrong, but with the economy, and the type of clients we have, they're not going to want to have something that's right in your face and glitzy.'" The boutique owner went for a plain black model. Another client selected a flashy metallic bag but toned down the printing. Raznick said, "Instead of the name being huge, she did it, like, vertical on the bag." Recently, he produced a Reusable Brown Bag for Bloomingdale's—only the fourth in the series since the original Big Brown Bag débuted, in 1973, to accommodate oversized pillows.

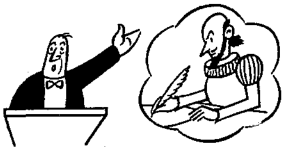
Gerard Prendergast, a professor of marketing at Hong Kong Baptist University, and a co-author of a 2001 study titled "Consumer Perceptions of Shopping Bags," said by telephone that he had not heard of luxury shoppers preferring no-name bags to branded ones. "I'm very excited!" he said. "This is a new topic for research."

In the study, Prendergast and his colleagues conclude that, among other things—the typical shopping bag is reused 2.7 times; a well-made bag is good for fifty to a hundred schleps—"the effects of conspicuous consumption in Hong Kong suggest that consumers like to use brand-named and attractive shopping bags due to a 'sense of vanity.'" Prendergast was asked to hypothesize about the reasons that would compel New York shoppers to want to use plain bags. "One would be a sense of guilt," he said. "But since when have the wealthy felt guilty?" He continued, "If the market starts to believe that brown bagging implies you are hiding a luxury brand inside, then brown bagging could also become a form of conspicuous consumption. If you've got it, you don't need to flaunt it!" He thought a while longer, and added, "The C.E.O.s of G.M., Ford, and Chrysler might want to brown-bag their corporate jets."

—*Lauren Collins*

THE BENCH

RETRIAL



The other night at the Cardozo School of Law, a group of distinguished legal minds got together to settle a dispute over a loan default. The lender wasn't Citibank or Countrywide—it was Shylock, from Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice." His last trial, English majors may recall, didn't go so well. (He was publicly humiliated, and was forced to convert from Judaism to Christianity; the authorities handed over his estate and half his money to his enemies.) Modern audiences tend to view his treatment at the hands of the Venetian court as unfair—the scholar and critic A. David Moody wrote that "it seems to involve a reversal of the right order of things"—and so Richard Weisberg, a professor of law and literature at Cardozo ("Poethics," "When Lawyers Write"), decided to give him an appeal.

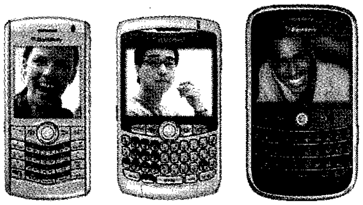
"Lawyers were one of the first groups, along with theatre directors, to see Shylock's position," Weisberg, who takes a pro-Shylock reading of the play, said last week. "Shylock really has the best lines—there isn't a lot of argument about that—but in the nineteenth century a prominent German legal philosopher, Rudolf von Jhering, was among the first to argue that he actually had the better legal case." This was an exhibition hearing (Weisberg arranged a similar one for Melville's Billy Budd in 2006), but the legal lineup was extremely legit. Hearing the case: the First Amendment expert Floyd Abrams; Jed S. Rakoff, a federal district judge in New York; Justice Dianne T. Renwick, of the Appellate Division of the New York State Supreme Court; the federal appeals-court judge Richard Posner; the Columbia literature professor Julie Peters; Bernhard Schlink, the law professor and novelist; and Anthony Julius, best known as Princess Diana's divorce lawyer.

The appeal was held in the Cardozo moot courtroom, before a sold-out crowd that seemed to be equal parts lawyers and Shakespeare nuts. Actors did a CliffsNotes version of the play, focussing on the trial scene. Quick refresher: Renaissance Venice, a different era in Judeo-Christian relations. Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, lends three thousand ducats to the Christian merchant Antonio, so that Antonio's friend can use it to woo the wealthy Portia. Shylock, who hates Antonio, demands a "pound of flesh" as collateral. Some things go wrong, and everyone ends up in court, where Portia, disguised as a doctor of law, gets Antonio off the hook and gets Shylock charged with attempted murder. The staging was contemporary: Antonio wore a suit; Shylock carried a briefcase.

After a short reception—sushi, wine, California wraps—the seven judges took the bench to hear arguments from lawyers for Shylock and Antonio. They were dressed as if for brunch (sweaters, turtlenecks), and a few jotted down notes. Michael Braff, a partner at Kaye Scholer, argued, on Shylock's behalf, that his client should get his money back, plus interest. (He did not press for "specific performance"—the pound of flesh that Shylock had been shouting about in the play. "After four hundred years, my client has had time to reconsider," Braff said.) Daniel Kornstein, a partner at Kornstein Veisz Wexler & Pollard, represented Antonio, and he attacked the validity of the pound-of-flesh agreement. He brandished a detailed brief that he had written, which compared the agreement to "a tainted C.D.O." and Shylock to a predatory lender.

"If it please the court," Kornstein said,

Life On BlackBerry



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“this is a case about an illegal contract.”

“What’s illegal about it?” Judge Rakoff interrupted. “As you well know, there is a virtual obesity epidemic in this country, and to remove a pound of flesh is wholly to the public good.”

“Not by a knife wielded by your sworn enemy,” Kornstein said. He brought up Shylock’s ulterior motives—“the deep hatred” he had for Antonio.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Floyd Abrams asked. “Why should we even consider that in deciding whether to enforce the contract?”

“It adds color,” Kornstein said. He went back to the pound of flesh. “The contract, on its face, contains a clause that is such a penalty that no civilized society—not even Venice, New York, here—would enforce it.”

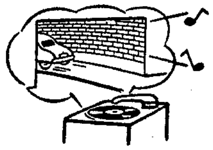
A woman in the audience called out, “They would in Venice, California.”

To skip, “Law & Order” style, to the rulings: the judges were split, but they came out, five to two, in Shylock’s favor. Schlink, Rakoff, Abrams, Peters, and Renwick said that he deserved to be repaid his three thousand ducats, though they differed on the question of interest. (Schlink, on the pound of flesh: “It was Antonio’s obligation to deliver,” but “our public policy forbids enforcing a contract in a way that enforcement leads to one party’s death.”) Posner and Julius voted to let Antonio keep the money.

Portia, admired by many readers for her “quality of mercy” speech, was reprimanded by the judges for impersonating a doctor of law. “The trial was a travesty,” Abrams said, of Shakespeare’s litigation scene. “Beautiful sometimes, funny sometimes, and ugly sometimes, but that judgment is not something that we sitting here today can enforce.” Posner said, “I’m particularly critical of Antonio’s conduct. His failure to insure his cargoes was completely irresponsible.” Renwick said that the whole thing made her think of the rickety deals that got us into the current financial mess—“the dangers of going into a contract with someone who has covert ideas and interests”—and suggested that all the parties were at fault. Posner agreed: “This is one of those cases in which we’ve just heard very fine lawyers argue the cases, but the litigants are all disreputable people. This is often true, particularly in the twenty-first century.”

—*Lizzie Widdicombe*

FRIENDLY FIRE DEPT.
NOTORIOUS

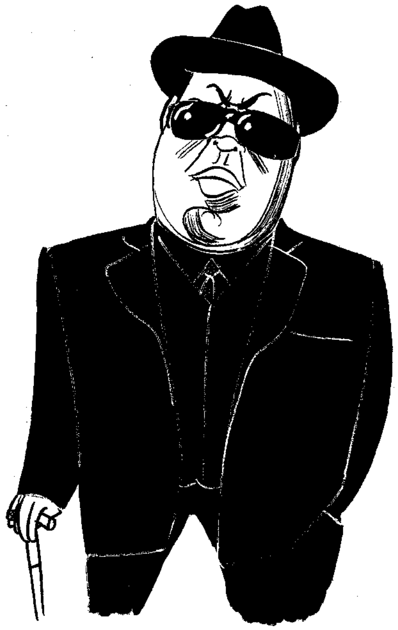


Plaxico Burress fans, fear not: there is life after humiliation by gunshot wound. Consider the case of Jamal Woolard, a.k.a. Gravy, an oversized, unheralded rapper from Brooklyn who was shot in the rear—possibly by a member of his own oversized entourage—outside the radio station Hot 97, two and a half years ago, and proceeded to give an interview on the air, while bleeding. Instead of sympathy, Gravy was met with skepticism and opprobrium, as many observers smelled a dangerous publicity stunt. Hot 97 announced a ban on playing his songs. His début album with Warner Music, “God Willing,” was shelved. In an interview with this magazine, shortly after the shooting, he rubbed his left pants leg (the bullet, he said, had gone “through the ass, through the thigh”) and mused, “You have to damn near *die* to be famous these days?”

With his rap career on hold, Woolard turned to acting, and was cast, from among ten thousand applicants, as the lead in “Notorious,” a bio-pic about the late rapper Notorious B.I.G., which opens next month. Not long ago, on the movie set, in Washington Heights, Woolard removed cotton balls from his mouth and rubbed his right cheek, which had just been slapped a dozen times by Angela Bassett. “She’s for real,” he said. “Can’t be faking that. It could affect sales.” Bassett plays Voletta Wallace, B.I.G.’s mother, and they’d been filming the scene in which she discovers her son’s drugs—at first, she mistakes them for mashed potatoes—and kicks him out of the house. (Wallace is a producer of the movie, and when she first saw Woolard come in to audition she said, “That’s my son.”)

Woolard declined an offer of ice for the cheek and took a lunch break, during which he referred to the Hot 97 fallout as “bygones,” and cited the wisdom of his character. “I mean, Big called it best,” Woolard said. “ ‘Mo money, mo problems.’ At that time, I was at the height of my career. I was the man. I tell you what: that day, I felt like I had Phil Jackson, Pat Riley—I had a ill team.” (He was referring to the Warner executives Kevin Liles and Lyor Cohen.) “And I got jammed up. But the blessing is, later it put me in a better position.”

That position had not come without hard work. Woolard spent five months in “Biggie boot camp,” taking acting lessons, studying choreography, and even receiving voice training at Juilliard. Woolard is diabetic, and the long days were physically draining. At one point, he lost his double chin, and had to eat his way back into the role. “Now I’m at three hundred and five,” he said, attacking a plate of chicken and rice like an offensive lineman at a training table. “Doing what I got to do.” He said that he was thinking about going on a diet after shooting wrapped, to create a “whole new identity” in time for his comeback. “So when the film comes out and I hit that red carpet, I’m all ‘Rocky’ and ripped up, and people just be, like, ‘What the fuck?’ ” he said. “Know what I’m saying?”



Jamal Woolard

As it happened, the day’s filming schedule mirrored nicely the progression of Woolard’s life story: first, the slap in the face, and, then, a reconciliation (Scene 33) where Bassett gets to meet her grandchild. Woolard himself is the proud father of a newborn daughter, Jamaya, and was spending as much of his time in New Jersey, with his wife, Trina, as in Bed-Stuy. “Now we just chillin’,” he said. “It’s love and greatness.”

—*Ben McGrath*

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THE FINANCIAL PAGE
NEWS YOU CAN LOSE

When the Tribune Company announced that it was filing for bankruptcy, last Monday, Sam Zell, the man who bought the company a year ago, for $8.2 billion, said that its problems were the result of a "perfect storm." You take readers and advertisers who were already migrating away from print, and add a steep recession, and you've got serious trouble. What Zell failed to mention was that his acquisition of the company had buried it beneath such a heavy pile of debt that any storm at all would likely have sunk it. But although Zell was making excuses for his own mismanagement, the perfect storm is real enough, and it is threatening to destroy newspapers as we know them. Layoffs and buyouts have become routine. The Miami *Herald* and the San Diego *Union-Tribune* are reportedly on the selling block, while lawmakers in Connecticut are trying to keep two newspapers there afloat. Even the New York Times Company has slashed its dividend and announced that it would borrow against its headquarters to avoid cash-flow problems.

There's no mystery as to the source of all the trouble: advertising revenue has dried up. In the third quarter alone, it dropped eighteen per cent, or almost two billion dollars, from last year. For most of the past decade, newspaper companies had profit margins that were the envy of other industries. This year, they have been happy just to stay in the black. Many traditional advertisers, like big department stores, are struggling, and the bursting of the housing bubble has devastated real-estate advertising. Even online ads, which were supposed to rescue the business, have declined lately, and they are, in any case, nowhere near as lucrative as their print counterparts. Papers' attempts to deal with the new environment by cutting costs haven't helped: trimming staff and reducing coverage make newspapers less appealing to readers and advertisers. It may be no coincidence that papers that have avoided the steepest cutbacks, like the *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*, have done a better job of holding onto readers.

Newspaper readership has been slowly dropping for decades—as a percentage of the population, newspapers have about half as many subscribers as they did four decades ago—but the Internet helped turn that slow puncture into a blowout. Papers now seem to be the equivalent of the railroads at the start of the twentieth century—a once-great business eclipsed by a new technology. In a famous 1960 article called "Marketing Myopia," Theodore Levitt held up the railroads as a quintessential example of companies' inability to adapt to changing circumstances. Levitt argued that a focus on products rather than on customers led the companies to misunderstand their core business. Had the bosses realized that they were in the transportation business, rather than the railroad business, they could have moved into trucking and air transport, rather than letting other companies dominate. By extension, many argue that if newspapers had understood they were in the information business, rather than the print business, they would have adapted more quickly and more successfully to the Net.

There's some truth to this. Local papers could have been more aggressive in leveraging their brand names to dominate the market for online classifieds, instead of letting Craigslist usurp that market. And while the flood of online information has made the job of aggregation and filtering tremendously valuable, none of the important aggregation sites, to say nothing of Google News, are run by a paper. Even now, papers often display a "not invented here" mentality, treating their sites as walled gardens, devoid of links to other news outlets. From a print perspective, that's understandable: why would you advertise good work that's being done elsewhere? But it's an approach that makes no sense on the Web.

These mistakes have been undeniably costly, but they're not the whole story. The peculiar fact about the current crisis is that even as big papers have become less profitable they've arguably become more popular. The blogosphere, much of which piggybacks on traditional journalism's content, has magnified the reach of newspapers, and although papers now face far more scrutiny, this is a kind of backhanded compliment to their continued relevance. Usually, when an industry runs into the kind of trouble that Levitt was talking about, it's because people are abandoning its products. But people don't use the *Times* less than they did a decade ago. They use it more. The difference is that today they don't have to pay for it. The real problem for newspapers, in other words, isn't the Internet; it's us. We want access to everything, we want it now, and we want it for free. That's a consumer's dream, but eventually it's going to collide with reality: if newspapers' profits vanish, so will their product.

Does that mean newspapers are doomed? Not necessarily. There are many possible futures one can imagine for them, from becoming foundation-run nonprofits to relying on reader donations to that old standby the deep-pocketed patron. It's even possible that a few papers will be able to earn enough money online to make the traditional ad-supported strategy work. But it would not be shocking if, sometime soon, there were big American cities that had no local newspaper; more important, we're almost sure to see a sharp decline in the volume and variety of content that newspapers collectively produce. For a while now, readers have had the best of both worlds: all the benefits of the old, high-profit regime—intensive reporting, experienced editors, and so on—and the low costs of the new one. But that situation can't last. Soon enough, we're going to start getting what we pay for, and we may find out just how little that is.

—*James Surowiecki*

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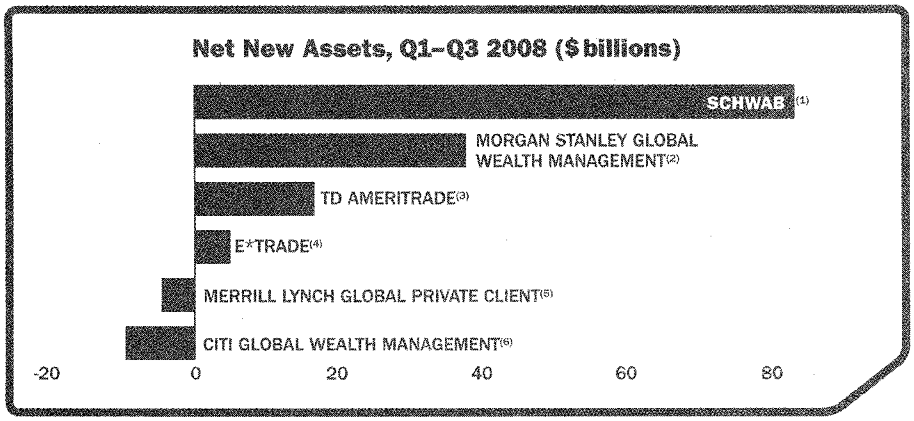

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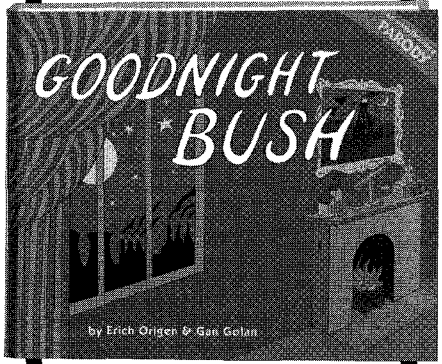
Goodnight Dick Cheney
whispering "hush"



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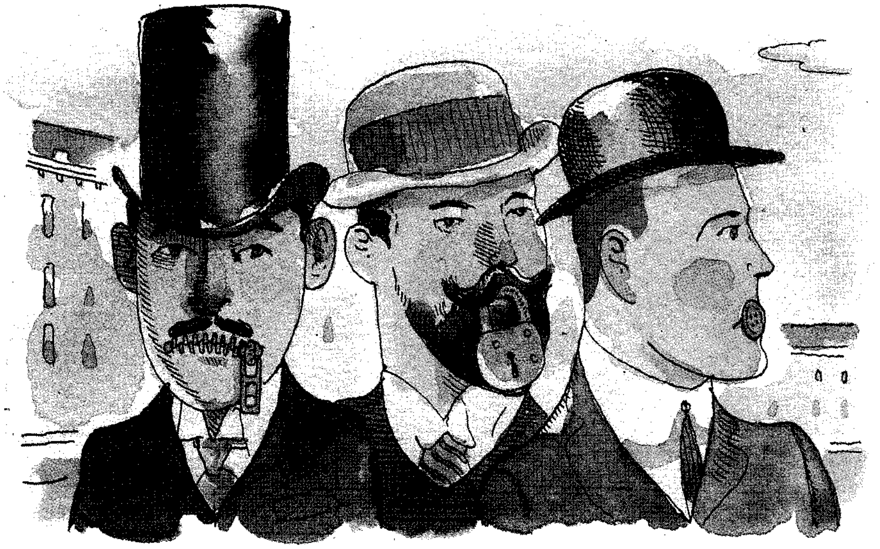
AMERICAN NOTES

THE PRIVILEGE OF THE GRAVE

BY MARK TWAIN

Its occupant has one privilege which is not exercised by any living person: free speech. The living man is not really without this privilege—strictly speaking—but as he possesses it merely as an empty formality, and knows better than to make use of it, it cannot be seriously regarded as an actual possession. As an active privilege, it ranks with the privilege of committing murder: we may exercise it if we are willing to take the consequences. Murder is forbidden both in form and in fact; free speech is granted in form but forbidden in fact. By the common estimate both are crimes, and are held in deep odium by all civilized peoples. Murder is sometimes punished, free speech always—*when* committed. Which is seldom. There are not fewer than five thousand murders to one (unpopular) free utterance. There is justification for this reluctance to utter unpopular opinions: the cost of utterance is too heavy; it can ruin a man in his business, it can lose him his friends, it can subject him to public insult and abuse, it can ostracize his unoffending family, and make his house a despised and unvisited solitude. An unpopular opinion concerning politics or religion lies concealed in the breast of every man; in many cases not only one sample, but several. The more intelligent the man, the larger the freightage of this kind of opinions he carries, and keeps to himself. There is not one individual—including the reader and myself—who is not the possessor of dear and cherished unpopular convictions which common wisdom forbids him to utter. Sometimes we suppress an opinion for reasons that are a credit to us, not a discredit, but oftenest we suppress an unpopular opinion because we cannot afford the bitter cost of putting it forth. None of us likes to be hated, none of us likes to be shunned.


BARRY BLITT

A natural result of these conditions is, that we consciously or unconsciously pay more attention to tuning our opinions to our neighbor's pitch and preserving his approval than we do to examining the opinions searchingly and seeing to it that they are right and sound. This custom naturally produces another result: public opinion being born and reared on this plan, it is not opinion at all, it is merely *policy;* there is no reflection back of it, no principle, and it is entitled to no respect.

When an entirely new and untried

political project is sprung upon the people, they are startled, anxious, timid, and for a time they are mute, reserved, noncommittal. The great majority of them are not studying the new doctrine and making up their minds about it, they are waiting to see which is going to be the popular side. In the beginning of the anti-slavery agitation three-quarters of a century ago, in the North, it found no sympathy there. Press, pulpit and nearly everybody blew cold upon it. This was from timidity, the fear of speaking out and becoming obnoxious, not from approval of slavery or lack of pity for the slave; for all nations like the State of Virginia and myself are not exceptions to this rule; we joined the Confederate cause not because we wanted to, for we did not, but we wanted to be in the swim. It is plainly a law of nature, and we obeyed it.

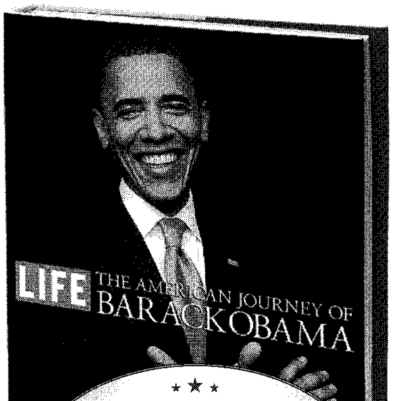
It is desire to be in the swim that makes successful political parties. There is no higher motive involved—with the majority—unless membership in a party because one's father was a member of it is one. The average citizen is not a student of party doctrines, and quite right: neither he nor I would ever be able to understand them. If you should ask him to explain—in intelligible detail—why he preferred one of the coin-standards to the other, his attempt to do it would be disgraceful. The same with the tariff. The same with any other large political doctrine; for all large political doctrines are rich in difficult problems—problems that are quite above the average citizen's reach. And that is not strange, since they are also above the reach of the ablest minds in the country; after all the fuss and all the talk, not one of those doctrines has been conclusively proven to be the right one and the best.

When a man has joined a party, he is likely to stay in it. If he change his opinion—his feeling, I mean, his sentiment—he is likely to stay, anyway; his friends are of that party, and he will keep his altered sentiment to himself, and talk the privately discarded one. On those terms he can exercise his American privilege of free speech, but not on any others. These unfortunates are in both parties, but in what proportions we cannot guess. Therefore we never know which party was really in the majority at an election.

Free speech is the privilege of the dead, the monopoly of the dead. They can speak their honest minds without offending. We have charity for what the dead say. We may disapprove of what they say, but we do not insult them, we do not revile them, as knowing they cannot now defend themselves. If they should speak, what revelations there would be! For it would be found that in matters of opinion no departed person was exactly what he had passed for in life; that out of fear, or out of calculated wisdom, or out of reluctance to wound friends, he had long kept to himself certain views not suspected by his little world, and had carried them unuttered to the grave. And then the living would be brought by this to a poignant and reproachful realization of the fact that they, too, were tarred by that same brush. They would realize, deep down, that they, and whole nations along with them, are not really what they seem to be—and never can be.

Now there is hardly one of us but would dearly like to reveal these secrets of ours; we know we cannot do it in life, then why not do it from the grave, and have the satisfaction of it? Why not put these things into our diaries, instead of so discreetly leaving them out? Why not put them in, and leave the diaries behind, for our friends to read? For free speech *is* a desirable thing. I felt it in London, five years ago, when Boer sympathizers—respectable men, taxpayers, good citizens, and as much entitled to their opinions as were any other citizens—were mobbed at their meetings, and their speakers maltreated and driven from the platform by other citizens who differed from them in opinion. I have felt it in America when we have mobbed meetings and battered the speakers. And most particularly I feel it every week or two when I want to print something that a fine discretion tells me I mustn't. Sometimes my feelings are so hot that I have to take to the pen and pour them out on paper to keep them from setting me afire inside; then all that ink and labor are wasted, because I can't print the result. I have just finished an article of this kind, and it satisfies me entirely. It does my weather-beaten soul good to read it, and admire the trouble it would make for me and the family. I will leave it behind, and utter it from the grave. There is free speech there, and no harm to the family. ♦

Barack Obama
The president-elect as you've never seen him before



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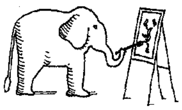

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FICTION

ANOTHER MANHATTAN

BY DONALD ANTRIM

They had lied to each other so many times, over so many years, that deceptions between them had become commonplace, practically repertoire. Everyone knew this about them—it wasn't news among their friends. That night, they had dinner reservations with Elliot and Susan, who were accustomed to following the shifts in attitude and tone—Kate's theatrical sighs, for instance, in reaction to Jim's mournful looks across the table at her—brought on by the strain of living in an atmosphere of worry and betrayal. It was winter, and dark, and the air in their little apartment was dry and nauseatingly warm; and yet what they needed, it seemed to Jim, was not to flee their home for another night of exciting conversational pauses and sly four-way flirting. They needed to sit down together, no matter how stuffy it got in the living room, no matter how loudly the radiators hissed and banged, and take turns speaking their minds. They had to talk. But first he would stop at the florist's on his way home from the outpatient clinic. If he walked through the door carrying a bouquet, there was a chance that Kate might smile.

There was a chance also that it wouldn't look awkward or strange when, at the end of the evening—he didn't really believe that he and Kate would be staying in—he paired with Susan for the walk through the cold, from the restaurant to Elliot's car. It might look, in other words, as if he were not bothered by Kate's whispering to another man. (She had a way, with Elliot, of bowing her head and mumbling furiously through the strands of hair that fell across the side of her face, so that, in order to make out her words, Elliot was forced to stoop and lean into the fog of her breath.) Jim's own affair, his affair with Susan, had been over for almost five months, long enough, he thought, as he approached the florist's on the corner by his and Kate's building, for him to begin experimenting—later that same night, if the mood was right—with innocently putting his arm around Susan's shoulder while she and he and Kate and Elliot walked in two sets of two toward the parking garage.

Of course, he wanted to be careful not to punish Kate, or, at least, not to seem to punish her, for her success in adultery. Elliot made her laugh—in a sweet way. Anyone meeting them for the first time would think they were a new couple.

It was wrong to hate her.

He'd arrived at the florist's. Inside, he went straight over to the roses in their refrigerated case. Though it was a cold day, cold and very windy, and he'd come in chilled, the short walk across the heated space warmed him, and he could feel the frigid air hit him in the face when he yanked open the glass door. He leaned in and peered at the flowers. He asked the girl, "Do you have yellow roses that haven't already bloomed and, you know, opened?"

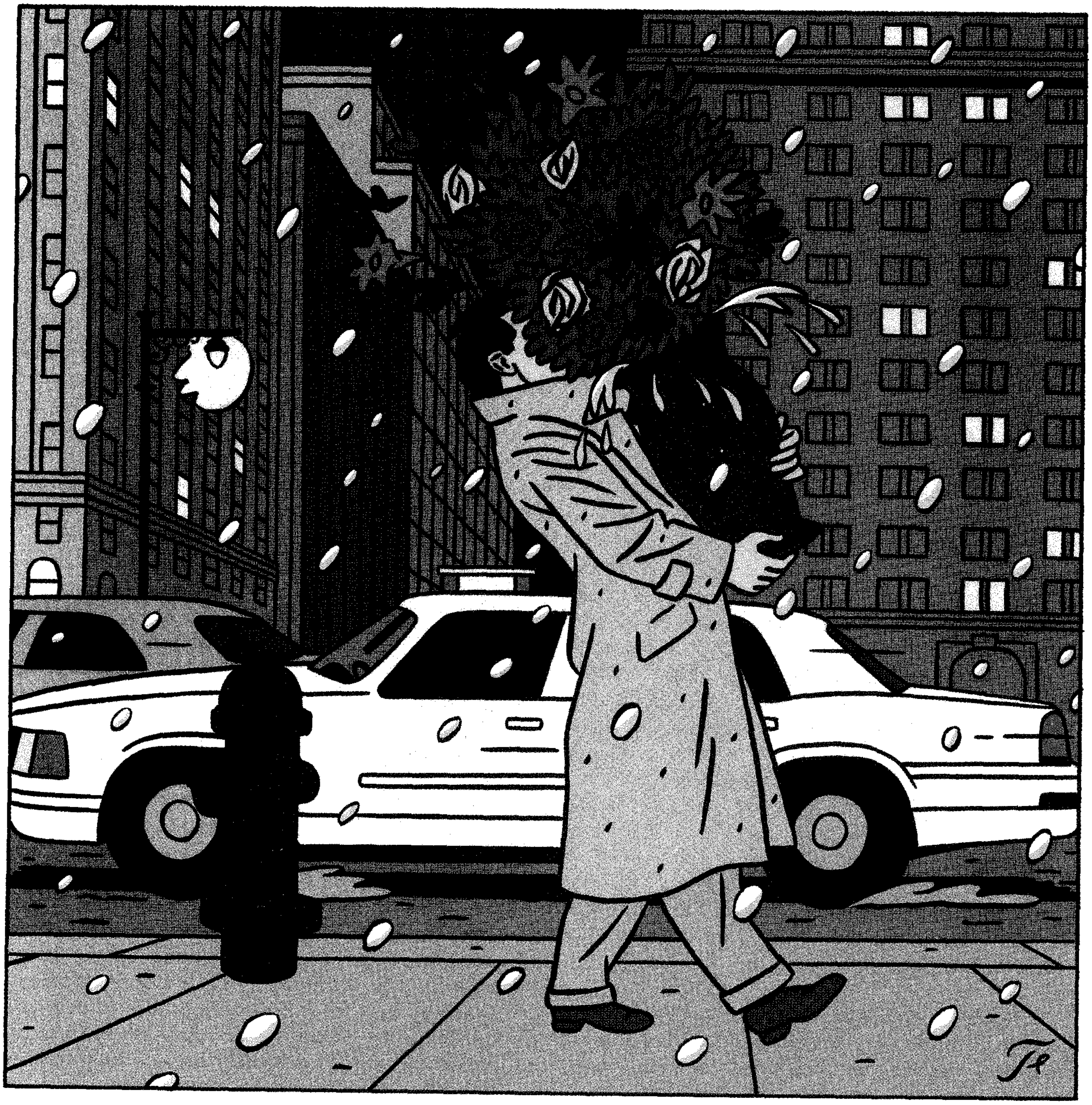
Yellow roses, signifying friendship more than eros, seemed right, given the complex potentials of the evening.

"We only have these."

"They're pretty, but they're not going to last."

She was pretty as well, the girl showing him roses. Had he seen her in here before and somehow not noticed? How old was she? Should he risk looking into her eyes? Was she wearing a ring? What about her ass? And what had he said to her just now? Blooming and opening meant the same thing in relation to flowers. He'd become inarticulate in her presence.

Kate, in the meantime, was upstairs in the apartment, talking on the phone to Elliot. The call had gone on for more than five hours. Kate had had to use all available phones: her cell phone and, before the cell, the apartment's two cheap cordless handsets, one in the kitchen and



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one in the bedroom. "Can you hear beeping? I've got to switch phones. Hang on," she'd exclaimed when the kitchen phone's battery began dying. Carrying that phone (her first of the call), she'd gone into the bedroom, picked up its brother from the night table, and said, into this new phone, "Are you there? Can you hear me? Hold on while I hang up the other phone," after which she'd taken both phones to the kitchen and dropped the dead one into its cradle on the wall. A small cabinet door beside this phone opened onto a narrow and dark airshaft that had once housed a dumbwaiter. Kate opened and closed this empty cabinet several times while explaining, on the bedroom phone, why Elliot's being married and her being married shouldn't necessarily be considered something they had in common. That they were both childless could stand as an area of emotional parity, she felt, considering the fact that they both remained unsure as to whether to have children, while their spouses frequently made it clear that, in their opinions—Susan's specifically regarding Elliot, Jim's specifically regarding Kate, and neither Susan nor Jim meaning to suggest a marital reconfiguration—they'd make "a great dad" or "a great mom."

Elliot interrupted: "Don't you get tired of hearing that?"

"It's beside the point," Kate answered, and went on, "Oh, Elliot, why is talking to you so damn fucking difficult?"

"Do you need an answer?"

"You know me, always curious." How stupid was that? She'd been trying, not for the first time, to lovingly make clear to Elliot why she could no longer sleep with him. During the first hours of the conversation she'd been able to control the impulse to bait and flirt. But the business of swapping phones, the walking from room to room in the stuffy apartment, had, as it were, weakened her. It was as if, in losing that first phone, she'd lost a line of defense, however symbolic, against Elliot's desire. Or maybe, she thought as she stood in the kitchen, opening and closing the dumbwaiter door with one hand, the necessary act of sacrificing one phone for another could be read as a veiled enactment of the sort of ambivalence required for alternating between lovers in the first place. Or was that too absurd?

"Say that once more. I didn't hear what you were saying," she said to Elliot. The heating pipes banged; day was turning to dusk. She listened to the hiss of steam escaping from the radiator beneath the kitchen window. Elliot began again, "I was saying that I sometimes think that you think that because I'm a psychiatrist I can automatically see all the different sides of a situation. But I'm not that kind of psychiatrist."

"Please don't talk to me like I'm one of your postdocs," she said, and he took a long breath.

He said, "Kate, we're involved with each other, Kate."

"Jim's your friend."

"And so are you my friend."

"Your wife is my friend, too." She continued, "Fuck, I hate this. Now *this* motherfucking phone is beeping. Hold on. Elliot, can you hold on?" She swapped the bedroom phone for the insufficiently charged kitchen phone, went with that phone back into the bedroom, and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Kate, why are you bringing up Susan? I need to know what your point is. We agreed that we weren't going to talk about Susan. So where are you going with this? Kate? Are you there?"

He waited.

"Will you talk to me? Please, don't do this. Don't do this, Kate. All right, fuck this, fuck this, fuck—"

His phone was beeping. It wasn't the battery. It was another call. He said, "Kate, hang on a minute. Hang on, Kate."

He took the call. "Hello?"

"It's me," she said, and then informed him in a miserable voice that both her home phones were dead, and that she was on her cell phone and just wanted to say that she didn't much enjoy dishonesty.

"You'll have to speak up," he said.

"Can you hear me? Tell me when the signal is clear." She pressed the cell phone against her ear and walked from the bedroom to the living room, then into the kitchen, then straight down the hall, passing the tiny second bathroom, with the broken, unusable toilet, to the apartment's miniature front foyer.

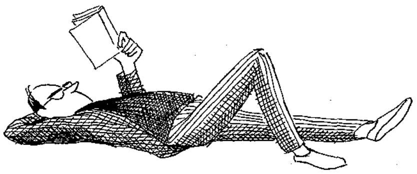
"Here?" she said. "Here?"

"I'm losing you," he said. And so she retraced her route, winding up back in the living room, where she turned on a lamp. The sky was dark. Everywhere on the city's horizon she saw other people's lit windows. Once again, Elliot had bullied her—or she'd *let* him bully her—into leaving open the question of their affair. What was the use in arguing, anyway? Jim would come home any minute, and, a little later, the two of them would go out and meet Elliot and Susan for dinner. How crazy was that? She still had to shower and dress. She conceded to Elliot, "All right, I'll think about it."

"Tomorrow, then?" Elliot said, and added, "I knew you'd come to your senses." He joked that if he didn't get out of his office in the next few minutes he'd be forced to show up at the restaurant in his white coat. They said goodbye, and she put down the phone and wept for a quarter of an hour.

Downstairs at the florist's, Jim's bouquet for Kate was growing and growing. It featured not only yellow roses but red and pink solitaires, along with sprigs of heather, freesia, and alstroemeria; green and white calla lilies; blue irises; mums; and some other things the girl had plucked from buckets and waved in the air for him to see and approve. "What else? What does she like?" she'd asked him, as she leaned into the refrigerator and reached for more.

"That looks so nice. I think she'll like just what you like," he said, and wondered whether it was O.K. for him to have said it. Was it provocative? There were no other customers in the shop. Staying close but keeping his distance, he followed the girl from one display case to another. He might as well have been buying lingerie, he felt; and, in fact, it seemed to him that the bouquet was somehow intended for the girl, as much as for Kate, who would've been, well, not exactly mortified to know that her husband was downstairs using a shopgirl as a proxy to get himself worked up for sex later that night.



"Baby's breath," the girl said to him.

"Excuse me?"

"I love baby's breath."

"In that case, we'll have to have a bunch," Jim said.

"Good."

She turned away, laid the unfinished bouquet on its side on the countertop beside the cash register, and, with her back to him, said, "We have a *lot* to work with here." She glanced back over her shoulder (did she want him to come closer?), then, quickly—what a great flirt, he thought—turned away again and set to work breaking down the bouquet and separating the flowers into groups, a variegated series of stacks that she arranged not by color or type (except in the case of the combined red, pink, and yellow roses) but, as became clear, by stem length. When she had her piles, she picked up clippers.

"This will take a minute," she said.

He watched her snip the stems. He said, "Take your time."

But there was a problem: what were these flowers going to cost? The bouquet as she assembled it—as it came to *be*, in her hands—was broader and taller by far than what he'd come into the florist's wanting. It was less a bouquet than a proper arrangement, a centerpiece, thanks in part to the leafy green branches the girl stuffed between blossoms, and the pale-white baby's breath, which she didn't so much layer as clump into the globular mass.

"Can we take some out?" he asked, and wished he hadn't. What kind of man courts a woman by letting her make an enormous bouquet for his wife, then asks her to pare back?

"What would you like me to take out?" the girl asked. Was she annoyed? She had her back to him. Did she think less of him? Did she think he was a cheap bastard who cheats on his wife?

"It's just that I was hoping to use a particular Arts and Crafts vase on the mantel, which, in my opinion, these would look lovely in," he elaborately lied. (Actually, there was a vase on the mantel—but so what?) He went on, "What I mean to say is that the vase I have in mind isn't very big."

Did he need excuses? Did he need to bring up his home life?

He went into reverse. "Come to think of it, never mind about that vase on the mantel. It would be a shame to wreck such a nice bouquet."

"I'm not going to wreck anything."

Was she scolding him? Were things heating up between them? He waited for her next move.

"I can give you a bigger vase," she proposed, finally.

He held his breath. She had to be at least twenty years younger than he. But it wasn't their age difference, nor the fact that he was married, that made him feel uncertain of himself. The problem was his thought process: the lithium he was taking in small doses brought a slower speed to reality. It was the lithium or the antidepressant cocktail or all of it in concert. At times, when he spoke, he felt as if a kind of mental wind were blowing his thoughts back at him, forcing him to self-consciously order his syntax as he pushed words out.

"I just got—I just got out of the hospital!" he blurted.

He watched her as she turned to face him; in her hands she held white lilies and a red satin bow, and her eyes looked left, right, left.

"I shouldn't've said that! Forget I said that! I didn't mean to say that! Give me the vase. I want a vase."

"Oh!" she said, as if startled to realize that she was still clutching pieces of the bouquet. "Let me run in the back and get one."

While Jim and the girl sorted themselves out downstairs, Kate was marching around the apartment in her red platform heels, shoving items into her purse and looking in the usual places for her keys. She had to flee before Jim walked in. She could phone him from the street and tell him that she'd meet him at the restaurant. Going from Elliot to Jim to Elliot *and* Jim *and* Susan without a break was bullshit. But, seriously, where was she going to go? It was too cold out to sit on a bench. The bar next door to the restaurant was bleak and depressing, an old men's dive, and the bar inside the restaurant would be a mob scene of people pushing for tables. She could stand idly flipping through magazines at the newsstand across Broadway, but that would mean accommodating the line of men squeezing past her to look at porn at the rear of the store. She slammed the apartment door behind her and started down the five flights of stairs. Too often in winter she failed to leave the apartment before sunset. It worked hell on her mood.

Outside, the wind was blowing hard. She wasn't wearing a hat. She tightened her scarf around her neck, tugged up her coat collar, lowered her head, and walked toward Broadway with her fists punched down into her pockets and her purse clinched under her arm. If only it would snow. But when did it ever snow anymore? Hat or no hat, she wouldn't've

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minded a few snowflakes swirling down through the city light to settle on her head. When she'd been a girl, snow had lain on the ground all winter. That was what she remembered. Of course, she was thinking of the farm, of New England, not New York. So what was her point? These days, it rarely snowed the way it had back in the years before her parents died. The snowfalls she remembered from her childhood seemed lost to time and, she supposed, the changing climate.

She hurried along as quickly as she could in her high heels. At Broadway, she turned uptown and passed the florist's, where the pretty shop assistant had just come out from the back with the flowers—flowers for *her*, for Kate—in their vase.

"Here we are," the girl announced to Jim. She extended her arms and held the flowers out in front of her, presenting them. Before he could move to take them from her, however—it was the medication, warping his mind and delaying his reaction—she heaved the arrangement onto the counter and explained that she'd had to search high and low for an extra-heavy vase, one that was not only broad enough but also deep enough to properly anchor the bouquet.

Jim and the girl admired her creation. With its stalks vertical and free to fan out or droop down, the bouquet's real immensity became apparent. Roses with their thorns stuck out everywhere, and the lilies, whose columnar stalks the girl had bunched at the center, shot up through the top of the bouquet like, like, like—like insane trees towering above some insane world, he thought. He was light-headed when he spoke. "I love the way you've used ribbons and bows to tie the blossoms into clusters. It looks like a bouquet made of little bouquets! There's so much to see! I can smell the lilies. Don't you want to inhale that scent? Do you know the painter Fragonard? Do you know Boucher? Look at Boucher's flowers. They're practically obscene. There might be a Boucher hanging at the Frick."

He went for it. "Do you like museums?"

"When I have time."

"I could show you the Frick!" He grinned widely and shrugged his shoulders and tipped his head, and she mirrored him, shrugging her own shoulders and making a funny face.

"You're very good at what you do," he added, and she said, "Thank you," then asked him, "How would you like to pay?"

He tried to imagine what he'd be forced to spend. Whatever the amount, it would be too great. The bills from his recent hospitalizations were mainly covered by Kate's insurance—the policy was hers; they'd gone ahead and got married in order for him to take advantage of it during this protracted (Kate's word, sometimes used sarcastically) time of crisis in his life—but there were nevertheless many outstanding fees, brand-new bills arriving every other week, plus the only partly reimbursable expense of the aftercare program he attended across town, on the Upper East Side.

"Let's charge it." He handed the girl his debit card.

She swiped the card. "It's not going through," she said. After passing the card through the machine a second time, she apologized. "This doesn't automatically mean that there's a problem with the account," she said. "You'll have to contact your bank. Would you like to try another account?"

"I don't have another. Tell me the total?"

"Three hundred and forty-one dollars and sixty cents."

His anxiety spiked and he took a breath. How could a bouquet of flowers be that much?

He put his hand in his pocket and felt around for cash, but what was the point?

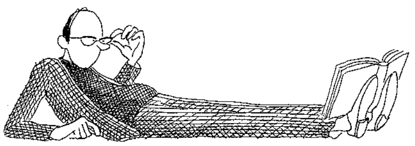
"Hold on a minute," he said.

What to do, what to do? He was going to have to call his wife. Was he going to have to call her? He was going to have to call her. He took out his phone and dialled—in that moment he was glad that he had his meds on board—and right away Kate picked up and hollered, "Where *are* you? I'm at the restaurant with Susan! Elliot is out parking the car. Did you go to your *therapy*?"

"Could you not shout, Kate?"

"It's goddam packed in here!"

"I need to talk to you, privately," he said, and turned away from the shopgirl. But there was no way, in the small space, to keep the girl from overhearing, so he put his hand over the phone, leaned toward her, and whispered, "I'll be right back," then stepped out of the shop, stood on the sidewalk in the freezing wind, and slowly, deliberately humiliated himself, saying to Kate, "I stopped on my way home and bought you flowers, but the bank account isn't coöperating with my card for some reason and now I'm stuck at the florist's because I don't have enough cash on me, and I think the problem is simply that—shit, I don't know what the problem is, I must not have kept my eye on the balance, and it's possible that we're overdrawn. I know we've talked about this. But it's not a serious problem, I promise."



"Oh, Jim. Are you *spending*? How much have you *spent*?" Kate cried, and he winced.

He said, "Is Susan there?"

"Do you not hear a word I say? She's right here! We're drinking Manhattans. Are you coming? We're waiting for you. Why do you want to talk to Susan? Jim, are you spending our money?"

"I don't want to talk to Susan. I'd just prefer that this conversation be private between the two of us."

"Please, Jim, as if everyone we know doesn't already know everything there is to know?"

"I'm not—I am not spending our money."

"You're agitated."

"Why are you diagnosing me? I'm not agitated. I wanted to surprise you with flowers. But clearly it was just another of my many mistakes. I'll think twice next time. Everything I do is unwanted."

"Stop it," Kate said to him then.

Through the phone he could hear sounds from the restaurant bar, voices and other noises in the after-work crush. Then the wind came up, and the only sound he heard was the phone's own static. The wind died, and Kate's voice was saying, "Elliot is here now, and Lorenzo is clearing us a table. Let me talk to someone about the flowers."

In this way he was forced to trudge back into the shop, hold the phone out, and say to the girl, "She wants to talk to you."

The girl hesitated, then reached out and let him pass the phone into her hand.

"Hello?" she said into his phone.

He retreated to a corner of the store. Joking aside, he didn't care to loiter about, smelling the flowers, while the girl wrote

THREAD

I lack the rigor of a lightning bolt,
the weight of an anchor. I am
frayed where it would be highly useful—
and this I feel perpetually—to make a point.

I think if I can concentrate I might turn sharp.
Only, I don't know how to concentrate—
I know only the look of someone concentrating,
indistinguishable from nearsightedness.

It is hard for you to be near me,
my silly intensity shuffling
all the insignia of interiority.
Knowing me never made anyone a needle.

—*Dan Chiasson*

down his wife's American Express number. He would never learn the girl's name, not now, Kate would see to that, he told himself as he peered out from his hiding place behind a leafy potted tree. He saw the shop's buckets of flowers and the refrigerators in a row, and the door leading to the back, but where was the girl? He heard her laugh in response to some remark Kate must've made, and realized that she was standing behind the bouquet. "Oh, don't I just know that about men and their important purchases!" she exclaimed.

What was Kate saying to her? Was he being made fun of, as usual? Was she calling him bipolar?

He had a problem with anxiety and suicidality, and, as Kate had reminded him in their conversation a moment earlier, everyone knew about his previous autumn's sojourns on the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge and his games of chicken—no, not games, not at all, really—on the fire escape outside their bedroom window.

He didn't want to think about any of that. Yet it was the reason he was now crouched behind a ficus, eavesdropping while a girl he wanted to fuck got treated to an earful of Kate—on *his* phone! And what was the big problem, anyway, if, a handful of times on his way home from day care, as he sometimes called his ongoing treatment, he'd got excited about life and jumped off the crosstown bus at Fifth Avenue and run into Bergdorf Goodman and ridden the elevator to the second floor and tried on clothes until closing? Was that unhealthy? His doctors didn't think he was manic-depressive; in fact, they'd ruled it out. Kate had been reading the clinical literature, though, and felt autodidactically certain that the Payne Whitney professionals were minimizing something in plain sight: his death-trip history, considered alongside the "conspicuous" spending on coats, ties, shirts, and shoes, represented, at the least, she thought, a mixed-state depression. "Why don't they have you on Olanzapine?" she'd got in the habit of asking him. He begged her not to interfere with his treatment, and suggested—thinking of her father's death and the forfeiture of the family farm in Massachusetts, when she was a teen-ager—that her consuming anxiety about bankruptcy, her emphasis on this as a potentially mortal trauma, might have less to do with his new handmade suits than with the ways in which his almost dying had reactivated an old mourning in her.

He peered from behind the ficus. He was wearing a ridiculous cashmere overcoat, and his suit today was a medium-gray flannel herringbone. It featured, on the jacket, minimal shoulder padding, dual vents, and a graceful, three-rolled-to-two-button stance (his current favorite lapel style), and, on the pants, single-reverse pleats and one-and-a-quarter-inch-cuffed trouser legs. Why would a man ever not cuff his trousers? He kept a single jacket-sleeve button open on the left, another open on the right. He didn't look like blown credit. Did he?

Kate was going to kill him. She was mad enough to kill him. That was a fact. What was he doing, charging expensive flowers for no reason on an average night in the middle of the week when they were already committed to a crippling tab—it was sure to be a huge bar bill, by evening's close—for dinner with Elliot and Susan? But, Kate thought, as she sat with their friends, waiting for him at a tiny table near the back of the restaurant, this was how it went with her husband: he made the gestures; she absorbed the costs. "How awful this all is," she sighed. She was on the phone to the girl at the florist's. Kate hadn't meant to be audible, not to the girl, and certainly not to Elliot, who would take her vexation over Jim as a cue to call her up the next day and argue for more afternoons at the hotel.

She'd been going once or sometimes twice a week to the East Side to meet Elliot at the Lowell Hotel, on Sixty-third Street between Madison and Park. She rode the bus. Typically, she arrived first. She got the room key, went up, and showered; if Elliot was held up at the lab and the day was growing dark, she might unlock the minibar and concoct a Manhattan or an approximation of a Manhattan, then recline naked by the window and look north toward the East Nineties, Carnegie Hill, where her mother, an only child, like Kate, had lived before marrying her father and moving to the farm.

Manhattans had been her mother's drink. Unlike her mother, Kate tried to keep herself to three an evening. At Lorenzo's that night, she was ahead of pace, finishing her second before having eaten a bite. She held her glass in one hand and her phone in the other, listening hard through the restaurant noise as the girl at the florist's recited back her AmEx number. Elliot sat quietly beside her. He had his arms crossed, and his chair pushed back at an angle to make room for his legs. Susan had got up from the table; she'd announced to Kate—sounding well on the way to being tight—"Kate, you're my best friend, but I don't know how you drink such a strong drink." To Kate and Elliot together, she'd added, "Will you two do me a big giant favor? Will you snag Lorenzo and ask him to bring me a Cosmo?"

"Don't utter a word to me about my husband," Kate warned Elliot, once Susan had gone to the bathroom.

Into the phone, to the girl, she said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean you. I was talking to somebody else."

Meanwhile, in the women's room, Susan was on her own phone, calling Jim's number from a stall.

It was the girl who answered, of course.

"Hello, can you hold?" the girl said. The line went briefly dead. After a pause, the girl came back and said, "May I ask who is calling?"

"May I ask who's answering?"

"Hold, please."

"Sir?" the girl called out to Jim. She looked this way and that for him. Where had he gone? The shop closed at eight. It was nearly closing time. "A woman is calling you!"

"I'm here! I'm right here!" he answered from behind his tree.

"He'll be with you in one second," he heard her promise the caller. After that, there was a pause, before, in a business-like tone, the girl resumed with Kate. "I'm sorry to have to ask you this again. Would you mind verifying the last five digits and the expiration date?"

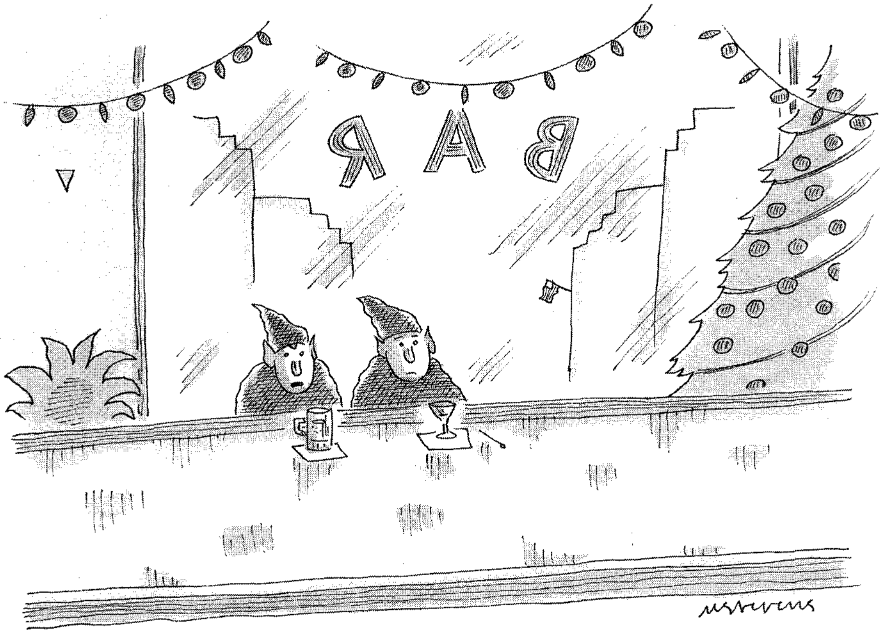
Back when he was in the hospital—in the past six months, there had been three emergency-room visits and two locked-ward admissions—he had spent day after day lying on a mattress, crying. His doctors (along with the psychiatric nurses and the social workers who led the daily therapy groups) had encouraged him to uncurl himself from the fetal position and try, at least try, to watch television or play a board game with the other patients, but this had mostly proved too great a challenge. There had been times when, walking to or from the bathroom or the water fountain or the patients' common room, or standing in line to receive his medications at the nurses' station, or even simply sitting upright on the table in the examining room, he'd had the strong sensation that the air through which he moved was gathering around him and becoming—really, no word was sufficient to name it—substantive. Its weight pressed in on him. This hurt, it hurt terribly, yet when he tried to locate the source of the pain he could not: it came, as he knew, only from himself. On the mattress, shattered and sobbing over, say, Kate and their messed-up love, he'd lain crushed, as if by atmospheres.

"Sir?"

The girl's voice seemed to echo through the shop. He peeked up. When had she come out from behind the bouquet? He could see her standing on the other side of the tree. She was looking at him through the leaves.

"Are you all right, sir?"

"I maybe—I need a minute." His mouth was dry and his heart was beating fast. That could be his meds, of course.



"What a Christmas! First the North Pole melts, then all the elves get laid off."

"There's someone who wants to talk to you. Do you think you can take the call? Would you like to try?" She held his phone out with one hand, reaching toward him through the branches.

He had to reach into the tree to meet her hand. He was sweating.

"Hello?" he said into the phone.

"What the hell, Jim?" Susan said to him from the women's-room toilet at Lorenzo's.

"Susan, how are you?" he said.

"I've been better."

"I'm sorry."

"We're all here, Jim. We're waiting and waiting for you."

"I'm doing my best to get there. Have you ordered yet? What are the specials? What looks good?"

"Kate is beside herself. She says the two of you are bankrupt. She says you've spent all the money."

"I haven't."

"Don't lie to me, Jim. Please, don't lie to me." She was sniffling, beginning to weep, lightly.

"Stop crying, stop crying, baby," he whispered into the phone. Then he laid his hand over the receiver and said to the girl, who was still peering down at him through the leaves of the tree, "You'll have to excuse me one more time." With a powerful effort of will, he stood upright and came out from behind the ficus. He didn't dare look at the girl, but he heard her telling him, as he pushed painfully past her toward the door, that it looked like his wife's American Express card wasn't working, either—and was there any way for him to pay for the flowers?

He waved his hand, motioning that he'd return. He stepped out into the cold on Broadway. He pulled up his overcoat's shawl collar. The door to the florist's closed behind him.

Back at their table for four, Kate and Elliot had hit a snag.

"Let me talk to him," Elliot said. He had his elbows on the table. He'd drunk almost none of his Scotch.

"That's not a good idea."

"Give me your phone." He held out his hand.

"I'm on hold."

"Kate," he said.

"Leave me alone."

"As you wish," he said, leaning back in his chair, and she burst out at him, "How can you act like this? You're a doctor. How can you be so unfeeling?"

He said, "What does my being a doctor have to do with my feelings?" (She rolled her eyes at this, but he didn't appear to notice.) He went on, "I may be a doctor, but I'm not your husband's doctor."

"His name is Jim, remember?"

"I think you're drunk. That's what I think."

He got up from the table, patted his pockets—checking for his own phone—and said, "God damn it, I do research. I don't treat patients. He has excellent doctors. I'll call him myself."

When he'd gone and Kate was alone, Lorenzo arrived with Susan's Cosmopolitan.

"Everybody has gone away and left you," Lorenzo said, and Kate chirped back, "Everybody's gone!"

"Let me bring you another Manhattan." Lorenzo placed Susan's cocktail on the table and picked up Kate's empty glass. Kate managed a little smile. She held her phone to her ear. "Jim? Jim, are you there?" she whispered.

Six blocks downtown, Jim was on the line to Susan. "I'm here, I'm here with you, baby," he assured her. In fact, he wasn't thinking of sleeping with her again. Oh, he'd loved sleeping with Susan—that wasn't the problem. But that evening his body was compressing: the weight of the air was on him, flattening his libido and his trust in humankind.

"Susan," he said. "Susan."

"What is it?" she said. Her voice filled the stall. "What is happening? Is it happening? Is it happening to you now? I'm so scared. What do I *do*?"

"Susan," he said. "Susan."

He explained to her that in a few minutes he was going to calmly walk back inside the florist's and steal a mysterious and beautiful bouquet that he and an angel had made for Kate. He'd helped the angel, he pointed out. He was feeling honest. He acknowledged to Susan that he was speaking metaphorically when it came to angels—in order to seem aboveboard and keep her trust. He needed her to be cool when he entered the restaurant, he told her. Then he ended the call and switched over to Kate.

"I'm coming," he said.

"I'm glad," she said.

"I love you," he said.

"I love you, I love you," she said. She was alone at their table.

She said, "Have you talked to Elliot?"

He said, "I haven't heard from him."

Elliot, in the meantime, had been unable to get through, Jim's phone lines having been taken up by both their wives. He'd left two messages already, one saying, "Jim, call me, all right?," the other, "Jim, will you call me?" His third attempt got through, but Jim didn't answer. He heard the beeping, plucked the phone away from his ear, glanced at it, saw who was calling, and said, to Kate, "It's him. There is no way that I want to speak to him right now."

"I understand," she said. Then she said, "Just get here, dear, and have dinner with us. We all need food. We need to eat."

He said, "Has he taken care with you, since I've been gone?"

"Gone?" she said.

"I don't know how else to put it."

She asked, "Will you stay where you are, until people come?"

"Don't send an ambulance," he said to her.

He put his phone in his pocket. He turned and faced the door to the flower shop. A few people swept past him on the windy avenue—or so it seemed; his thoughts were with the pain that was coalescing beneath his temple. He wanted to put it out. He could imagine different ways to do this. This was how it was when his mind turned to high open windows or unlocked rooftop fire doors or breaks in the chain-link fences lining bridge walkways.

He took a step forward. The door was made partly of glass, and he could see into the shop. It occurred to him that it would be easy to break the window with his fist and deliberately cut up the veins in his arms. Instead, he put his hand on the doorframe and pushed. He stuck his head inside. He was acting guiltily, though he knew there was no reason to, not at the florist's—he hadn't done anything yet. Still, he snuck in, ashamed.

The girl was nowhere in sight. The bouquet looked bigger than it had the last time he'd sized it up. How would he manage to get it up Broadway in his trembling hands? Beside it on the table—careful, he had to be careful—were the girl's pruning shears, as well as regular scissors and a small sharp knife.

He told himself to let those things lie.

Uptown at the restaurant, Lorenzo brought Kate her drink. She asked for bread, and apologized to him for taking so long to order dinner. "We'll all be here together soon," she sighed.

She was right about that. Elliot had given up trying to reach Jim, and the cold had driven him back inside. He was threading his way down the aisle to their table. Susan, too, would return, as soon as she had peed. Pride had made her unable to, while on the phone.

And that left Jim, who had no desire to become a thief. Might he, instead, offer something in barter for the flowers? His wristwatch wasn't worth much. His overcoat was brand-new, and cost well more than the watch and the bouquet combined. He decided to leave an I.O.U., promising to come back another day with money, or, if not with actual money, then with a clear idea of when one or another of his or his wife's credit cards might again be active and usable.

But when he tried to hold a pen in his hand, he could not; and when he tried to focus his eyes on the piece of paper lying beside the cash register—it was the scrap of a receipt on which the girl had pencilled Kate's American Express information—he found that his mind was frantic. This was his disorder. This was the descent. He crumpled the receipt and shoved it into his pocket. He reached for the bouquet. The girl had put water in the vase.

Had you been walking downtown on Broadway that February night at a little past eight, you might have seen a man hurrying toward you with a great concrescence of blooms. You might have noticed that he did not even pause for traffic signals, but charged across streets against the lights; and so you might rightly have supposed that he could not see through the floral arrangement that he held (doing what he could to keep clear of thorns) at arm's length before him. Whenever a siren sounded in the distance—and, once, beating helicopter blades in the night sky caused him to sprint up a side street—he dropped into a furtive, crouching gait. His balance was off; he was paranoid about police. Windblown flowers lashed at his head. Seen from a distance, he might have brought to mind an old, out-of-favor stereotype: the savage in a headdress. But as he came closer, you would have noticed his European clothes, his stylish haircut; and you might have asked yourself, "What's wrong with that man?"

Had you stepped to the side as he hurtled past, tightened your scarf securely around your neck, and continued on your way, you might next have encountered a young woman on a street corner, distraught and coatless. "Did you happen to see a man carrying a bouquet of flowers?" she might have asked in a startled voice, and you would have looked away from her bare, pale legs, pointed upwind, and told her, "He went that way." By then, the first snowflakes would have been swirling through the caverns between the apartment buildings, down onto the thoroughfare.

Jim looked up and saw the snow on his way into Lorenzo's. For an instant, he took it as an omen—of what, though? He pulled hard on the restaurant door, forcing it open, and stumbled with his tattered flowers into the dark realm between the door and the velvet drapes that had been hung to keep the cold from sweeping in over diners at the front of the room.

He parted the curtains. "Pardon me," he said to the people seated near the entrance. Long- and short-stemmed flowers alike had snagged on the drapes. Now a waiter approached—and here came Lorenzo, too, calling, in his soft, *ristoratore's* voice, "*Ciao*, James. *Ciao.* I cannot call you Jim, you know."

"Lorenzo, *ciao*," Jim said. The waiter was busy tugging on the curtains. Lorenzo lent a hand. "This way, try this way," Lorenzo instructed. Jim spun left then right, enshrouding himself—and the bouquet—within the folds of drapery fabric. There followed a flurry of petals. The rose thorns came loose; the bouquet's topmost stems sprung free. He tumbled out into the room.

"I'm good, I'm fine," he said, nodding reassuringly (he hoped) to Lorenzo, the waiter, the people who'd turned in their seats to stare.

"What has happened to you, James?" Lorenzo pulled his white silk pocket square from his breast pocket and reached around the yellow and pink and blue and white flowers to dab at Jim's forehead.

"I ran all the way here," Jim said.

"You're bleeding," Lorenzo told him. Jim saw the blood spotting Lorenzo's handkerchief.

Lorenzo said, "You have a lot of scratches. You look like you've been in a fight with some squirrels or something." He laughed, nicely.

"I've—I have been fighting, Lorenzo. Not with squirrels. Roses," Jim specified, and Lorenzo said, "Ah, of course. Let me take them."

He spoke to the waiter. "Paul, will you please take these from James?" To Jim, he added, "We will bring them to your table."

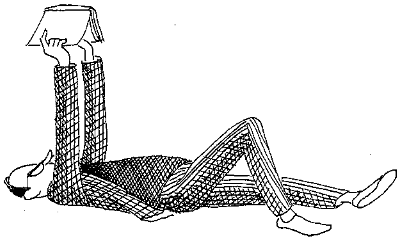
"No, no," Jim said. He explained to Lorenzo that the flowers were a gift for Kate, and that he needed to present them himself. This was crucial, he informed Lorenzo. He clutched the vase. His pants were wet from water that had sloshed over the rim. Water stained his shoes. He could see tiny snags marking the sleeves of his overcoat and the front of his suit. How frustrating, after having labored so hard to avoid the thorns. His clothes would have to go to a reweaver, he thought. Then his thinking disintegrated into bitter resignation. Everything he touched was ruined. The flowers were almost destroyed.

Nonetheless, he bore them down the aisle. Here and there, people ducked forward in their chairs, or to the side, letting him through. As he progressed toward the back, the room quieted. People put down their silverware, their wineglasses; Jim felt eyes watching him.

"Eat! Live while you can!" he wanted to proclaim to the crowd. But what did he have to teach anyone? He was a thief, a common criminal—worse. He'd stolen a bouquet to give to the love of his life.

When she saw him, she was filled with happiness. She'd had a lot to drink—but, well, it wasn't that alone.

"Kate," he said. She stood, and he lurched toward her. Elliot and Susan stood as well. They flanked Kate, who came out from between them—not unlike Jim, she was unsteady on her feet—saying, "I'm sorry, excuse me," as she tacked her way through the sea of tables.



They met near the bathrooms. The bar was to their right. Kate raised her open hands to wipe the blood from his face. Blood had run down his neck, and stained the collar of his shirt. "These are for you," he told her.

She was quietly crying, whispering, "They're beautiful, beautiful." Then her crying began in force, and she wailed, "You made it, oh, you *made* it, we were all so scared, and I felt so lost."

"I'm here," he said, and his own tears started. He wanted to tell her that everything would be better, that *he* would be better, that one day soon he would work again, and start paying some bills, and take the burden off her shoulders; that they would be able, at last, to leave the little apartment with the busted plumbing. He wanted to tell her how much he needed her.

But he could see, out of the corner of his eye, his horrid reflection in the mirror behind the bar. He looked down at Kate's hands, the blood smeared across her palms. And he saw the restaurant-goers and the waiters and waitresses and busboys, who, not knowing what to make of the bleeding and the crying and the broken lilies arcing over Jim and Kate's heads like some insane wedding canopy, had come from the kitchen or the bar to stand mutely around them. The pain in his body grew, and the words that spilled out of him were not words of love. Or they were. He spoke to his wife, as he spoke to the people gathered.

"Don't you see, Kate? Don't you *see*? It's time for me to go. I can't do this anymore. I have no place here. I don't belong. I hurt so. You can live and be happy. That will never be for me."

"No, no, baby," she wept at him.

Someone touched his arm. It was Elliot, who'd come up behind him. He said to Jim, "Let's get in the car."

Lorenzo was there, too. Kate said to Jim, "Honey, let Lorenzo take the flowers. Just for now," and he did.

A moment later, Lorenzo came back with a wet cloth. Kate used it to wipe her eyes and to clean Jim's face and her hands.

She tied the belt around his overcoat. She said, "There."

They went out of the restaurant, the four of them. Susan let Jim lean on her, and Elliot steadied Kate. On the way out the door, they heard Lorenzo, behind them, telling his patrons, "Everything is all right. Our friend has had a bad time. Please, let me buy everyone a drink."

On Broadway, the wind had died, and the air seemed to have warmed. They walked out into new snow. And, wouldn't you know, Jim did wrap his arm around Susan's shoulders, and Elliot ducked down close to Kate, listening to her mumble whatever it was she had to say to him.

At the garage, Jim and Kate got into the back seat of Elliot's car. Susan sat beside Elliot. Elliot started the engine, turned on the headlights and the windshield wipers. *Thump, thump, thump.* He steered east. During the trip, Jim took his belt from around his waist. He gave Kate his scarf and his phone and his keys and all his money, which amounted to about thirty dollars.

Later, she would get on her knees on the emergency-room floor and extract the laces from his shoes. A nurse would come, then another, and a doctor promising sleeping pills.

By that time, after midnight, Elliot and Susan would have driven up the F.D.R. Drive and out of Manhattan, through the Bronx, and into Westchester County.

"You can go home now, if you'd like," the doctor said to Kate. "We won't let anything happen to him."

He gave Kate a plastic garbage bag, into which she put Jim's overcoat and his suit jacket. She would use the last of his money for her crosstown taxi, and for milk and cereal at the Korean market near the apartment.

In the deep of the night, they came for him. A male nurse helped him into a wheelchair, and then pushed him through the white labyrinth of hallways and waited for the elevator.

Margaret, one of the night nurses, met him on the ward. She said, "Hello, Mr. Davis. You're back with us again, I see." She asked, "Do you think you can walk?" She gave him Ativan and a paper cup of water, and watched while he swallowed. Then she showed him to a room of his own. ♦

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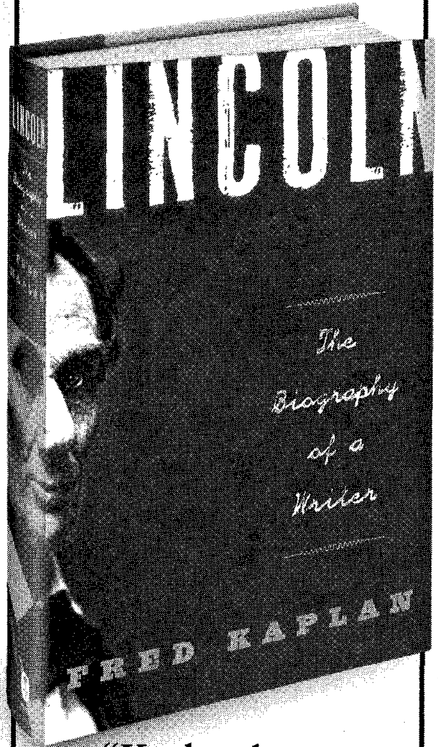

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LETTER FROM JAPAN

I ♥ NOVELS

Young women develop a genre for the cellular age.

BY DANA GOODYEAR

Mone was depressed. It was the winter of 2006, and she was twenty-one, a onetime beauty-school student and a college dropout. She had recently married, and her husband, whom she had known since childhood, was still in school in Tokyo. Thinking that a change might help, she went to stay with her mother, in the country town where she had grown up. Back in her old bedroom, she nursed her malaise, and for weeks she barely left the house. "I'd light a match and see how long it would burn, if you know what I mean," she says. One day, at the end of March, she pulled out all her old photo albums and diaries, and decided to write a novel about her life. She curled up on her side in bed and began typing on her mobile phone.

Mone started posting her novel straight from her phone to a media-sharing site called Maho i-Land (Magic Island), never looking over what she wrote or contemplating plot. "I had no idea how to do that, and I did not have the energy to think about it," she says. She gave her tale a title, "Eternal Dream," and invented, as a proxy for her adolescent self, a narrator named Saki, who is in her second year of high school and lives in a hazily described provincial town. "Where me and my friends live, in the country, there aren't any universities," Mone wrote. "If you ride half an hour or so on the train, there's a small junior college, that's all." Saki has a little brother, Yudai, and a close-knit family, a portrait that Mone painted in short, broad strokes: "Daddy/Mom/Yudai/I love you all so much." Before long, however, Saki, walking home from school, is abducted by three strange men in a white car: "—Clatter, clatter—/The sound of a door opening./At that moment . . ./—Thud—/A really dull blunt sound./The pain that shoots through my head." The men rape her and leave her by the side of the road, where an older boy from school, Hijiri, discovers her. He offers her his jersey, and love is born.

On Mone's third day of writing, readers started to respond. "Please post the next one," and "I'm interested to see what happens," she remembers them writing. She had been posting about twenty screens a day—roughly ten thousand words—divulging as freely as in her diaries, only this was far more satisfying. "Everyone is suffering over their loves and trying to figure out their lives, but my particular struggle was something I wanted to let other girls know about," she says. "Like, 'Hey, girls, I've been through this, you can make it, get up!' "

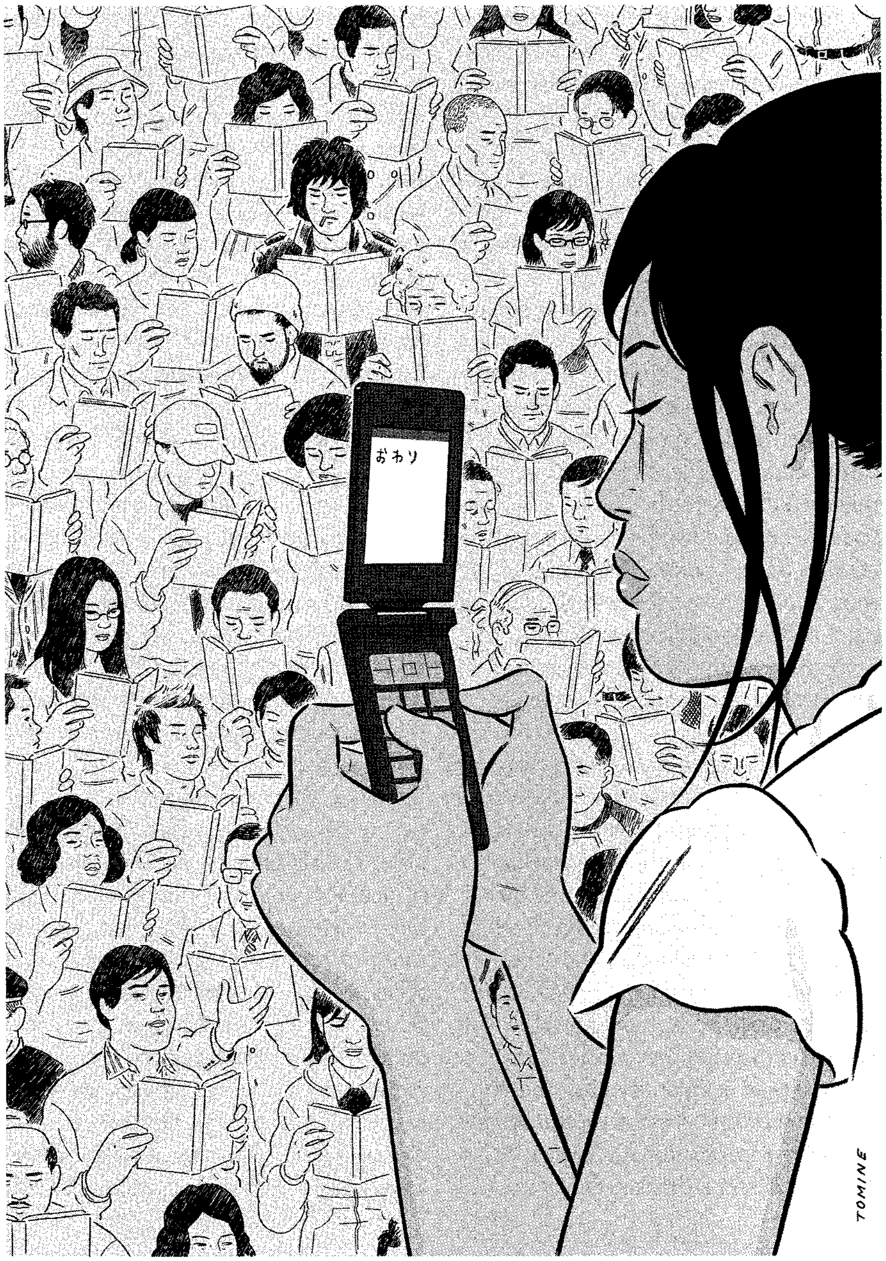
Soon, Mone's story took a Sophoclean turn. In a sudsy revelation scene, Saki discovers that she is not her father's child. She follows Hijiri to Tokyo for college, but he breaks up with her abruptly. After taking solace in a romance with a younger student named Yuta, she learns that Hijiri is her half brother:

Saki and Hijiri . . .
Are blood relatives, "siblings" . . . ?
The same blood . . .
Runs through our veins . . .

"Older brother and younger sister attract each other"
I've heard something like that.

Around the tenth day, Mone had an epiphany. "I realized that I couldn't put down just exactly what happened," she says. "It came to me that there needed to be the hills and valleys of a story." Her tale acquired the glaze of fiction—how she *wished* her life had turned out rather than how it did. In a postscript, she writes that, unlike Saki and Hijiri, who eventually get back together, Mone and the real Hijiri went their separate ways, and she ended up with Yuta, who had loved her all along.

By mid-April, Mone had completed her novel, nineteen days after she began. Her husband finished school and was starting a job in finance, and she went back to the city to join him. "I was living a casual, unfocussed life in Tokyo," she says, when she heard from Maho i-Land that a publisher wanted to release her novel as a proper book. In December, 2006, "Eternal Dream" was published, at more than three hundred pages. The book distributor Tohan ranked "Eternal Dream" among the ten best-selling literary hardbacks for the first half of 2007. By the end of that year, cell-phone novels, all of them by authors with cutesy one-name monikers, held four of the top five positions on the literary best-seller list. "The Red Thread," by Mei, which has sold 1.8 million copies, was No. 2. "Love Sky," by Mika, was No. 1, and its sequel third; together they have sold 2.6 million copies.



In 2007, cell-phone novels held four of the top five spots on the literary best-seller list.

ADRIAN TOMINE

The cell-phone novel, or *keitai shosetsu*, is the first literary genre to emerge from the cellular age. For a new form, it is remarkably robust. Maho i-Land, which is the largest cell-phone-novel site, carries more than a million titles, most of them by amateurs writing under screen handles, and all available for free. According to the figures provided by the company, the site, which also offers templates for blogs and home pages, is visited three and a half billion times a month.

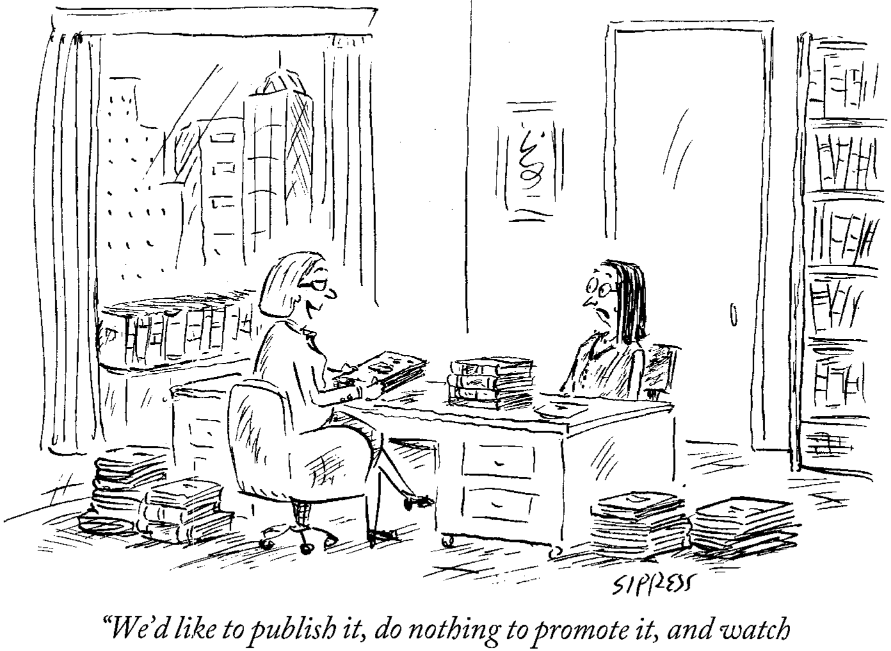
In the classic iteration, the novels, written by and for young women, purport to be autobiographical and revolve around true love, or, rather, the obstacles to it that have always stood at the core of romantic fiction: pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion, rape, rivals and triangles, incurable disease. The novels are set in the provinces—the undifferentiated swaths of rice fields, chain stores, and fast-food restaurants that are everywhere Tokyo is not—and the characters tend to be middle and lower middle class. Specifically, they are Yankees, a term with obscure linguistic origins (having something to do with nineteen-fifties America and greaser style) which connotes rebellious truants—the boys on motorcycles, the girls in jersey dresses, with bleached hair and rhinestone-encrusted mobile phones. The stories are like folktales, perhaps not literally true but full of telling ethnographic detail. "I suppose you can say *keitai shosetsu* are a source of data or information—the way they use words, how they speak, how they depict scenes," Kensuke Suzuki, a sociologist, told me. "We need these stories so we can learn how young women in Japan commonly feel."

The medium—unfiltered, unedited—is revolutionary, opening the closed ranks of the literary world to anyone who owns a mobile phone. One novelist I met, a twenty-seven-year-old mother of two who lives in the countryside around Kyoto, told me that she thinks up her stories while affixing labels to beauty products at her factory job, and sometimes writes them down on her cell phone while commuting by train to her other job, at a spa in Osaka. But the stories themselves often evince a conservative viewpoint: women suffer passively, the victims of their emotions and their physiology; true love prevails. "From a feminist perspective, for women and girls to be able to speak about themselves is very important," Satoko Kan, a professor who specializes in contemporary women's literature, said. "As a *method*, it leads to the empowerment of girls. But, in terms of content, I find it quite questionable, because it just reinforces norms that are popular in male-dominated culture."

In a country whose low birth rate is a cause for national alarm, and where Tokyo women in their thirties who have yet to find a mate are known as "loser-dogs," the fantasy of rural life offered by the cell-phone novels, with their tropes of teen pregnancy and young love, has proved irresistible. "Love Sky," by Mika, which has been viewed twelve million times online, and has been adapted for manga, television, and film, is a paradigm of sexual mishap and tragedy lightly borne. Freshman year, the heroine—also Mika—falls in love with a rebel named Hiro, and is raped by a group of men incited by Hiro's ex-girlfriend. Then Mika gets pregnant with Hiro's child, and he breaks up with her. Later, she finds out why: he is terminally ill with lymphoma and had hoped to spare her. In the movie version, which came out last fall and earned thirty-five million dollars at the box office, Mika has tears streaming down her face for the better part of two hours. The moral of the story is not that sex leads to all kinds of pain, and so should be avoided, but that sex leads to all kinds of pain, and pain is at the center of a woman's life.

Assuming a pen name is a rite of passage for a writer in Japan. Basho did it in the seventeenth century; Banana Yoshimoto did it in the nineteen-eighties. Mone chose hers rather arbitrarily: she liked the allusion to the French painter and the fact that the Japanese characters can mean "a hundred sounds." But, like many cell-phone novelists, she takes the disguise a great deal further, and makes of her identity a fictional conceit: the spectral, recessive wallflower author whose impression on the world, for all the confessions contained in her novel, is almost illegibly faint. She has a blog, which states her age as eight, her home as "the heart of a mountain," and her hair style as "a poisonous mushroom." Hobbies: drinking, being lazy, and behaving like a baby. Favorite type of guy: the teacher type. There is no photograph, just a cartoon avatar. "I would never let my image be seen," she told me. "If I'm ever photographed, I only show part of my face, just the profile." Apart from her husband, her immediate family, and a few close friends, no one knows that she's the author of "Eternal Dream." "I don't want to bring unwanted attention on my family," she said. "And it's not just me—there's my husband's family to think of, given the things I'm writing. I don't want to inconvenience anyone. Revealing anything, whether it's fiction or truth, is embarrassing, don't you think?"

Mone's withholding is consistent with the ethos of the Japanese Internet, which is dominated by false names and forged identities. "Net transvestites," the most extreme playactors are called. Match.com doesn't work well here, because a majority of people won't post photographs, and blogs—a recent study found that there are more of them in Japanese than in any other language—are often pseudonymous. Several years ago on 2Channel, a Japanese bulletin-board site that does not require registration, a user started a thread about his unexpected romance with a woman he met on a train. The story, a ballad of Japanese *otaku* (nerd) culture, became "Train Man"—a book, a movie, manga, a television series, and a play—but the author's identity, now hopelessly confused with anonymous collaborators who took the narrative in their own directions, has still not come to light. He is known only as Nakano Hitori: One of Those People. Roland Kelts, a half-Japanese writer born in the United States and the author of "Japanamerica," sees the Internet as an escape valve for a society that can be oppressive in its expectation of normative, group-minded behavior. "In Japan, conflict is not celebrated—consensus is celebrated," he said. "The Internet lets you speak your mind without upsetting the social apple cart." For confessional writers, it is a safe forum for candid self-expression and a magic cloak that makes it easy to disappear into the crowd. "The cell-phone writers have found a pretty clever strategy, through technology, for being part of the culture—participating in that interdependency—and also having a voice," Kelts said.



"We'd like to publish it, do nothing to promote it, and watch it disappear from the shelves in less than a month."

As an online phenomenon, the novelists were an overlooked subculture, albeit a substantial one. Crossing into print changed that. "In terms of numbers, the fact that the Web had many millions of people accessing and a great number reading is amazing, but the world didn't know whether to praise that or not," Satovi Yoshida, an executive at a cell-phone technology company, said. "With the awful state of publishing, to sell a hundred thousand copies is a big deal. For a previously unpublished, completely unknown author to sell two million copies—that got everyone's attention." Mostly, the attention was negative. In the fall of 2007, Yumi Toyozaki, a popular critic known for her strident reviews, was invited on the radio for what the show's host called a "critical thrashing of the booming cell-phone novels," and brought in a stack of books from the best-seller list.

"No. 10 is 'Eternal Dream,' by—how do you read this name? Mone? Hundred sound?" Toyozaki said. "These names are often formed with just two characters."

"Is the author Chinese-Japanese?" the host asked.

"I don't know."

"It sounds like a dog's name," the host said. He mentioned that these were literary best-sellers.

"I don't even want to use the word 'literary,'" Toyozaki said. "It should be in Other or Yankee."

"I visit a bookstore two or three times a week, but I never stop in the cell-phone-novel area."

Toyozaki concurred. "Once you stop there, you feel sick," she said.

Some feared that the cell-phone novel augured the end of Japanese literature. "Everyone in publishing received this as an enormous shock to the system, and wondered, What is happening here?" Mikio Funayama, the editor of *Bungakukai*, a respected monthly literary journal, told me. "The author's name is rarely revealed, the titles are very generic, the depiction of individuals, the locations—it's very comfortable, exceedingly easy to empathize with," he said. "Any high-school girl can imagine that this experience is just two steps from her own. But this kind of empathy is largely different from the emotive response—the life-changing event—that reading a great novel can bring about. One tells you what you already know. Literature has the power to change the way you think." For the January, 2008, issue of *Bungakukai*, Funayama assembled a panel to answer the question "Will the cell-phone novel kill 'the author'?" He took some comfort in the panel's conclusion: the novels aren't literature at all but the offspring of an oral tradition originating with mawkish Edo-period marionette shows and extending to vapid J-pop love ballads. "The Japanese have long been attracted to these turgid narratives," he said. "It's not a question of literature being above it. It's just—it's Pynchon versus Tarantino. Most people have a fair understanding of the difference." Banana Yoshimoto, whose extremely popular novels are said to borrow their dreamy, surreal style from girls' manga, wrote in an e-mail, "Youth have their own kind of suffering, and I think that the cell-phone novels became an outlet for their suffering. If the cell-phone novels act as some consolation, that is fine." She went on, "I personally am not interested in them as novels. I feel that it's a waste of time to read them."

Japanese books read right to left, and the script falls vertically from the top of the page, like spiders dangling from silk. The words are combinations of characters drawn from three sources—*hiragana*, a syllabary thought to have been developed for upper-class women, some twelve hundred years ago; *katakana*, a syllabary used mostly for words of foreign origin; and *kanji*, Chinese characters whose mastery is the measure of literary accomplishment. Until the eighties, when the word processor was introduced, the great majority of Japanese was written longhand. (Japanese typewriters, complicated and unwieldy because of all the *kanji*, were left to specialists.) Even now, personal computers are not widespread: one machine per family is common.

For young Japanese, and especially for girls, cell phones—sophisticated, cheap, and, for the past decade, capable of connecting to the Internet—have filled the gap. A government survey conducted last year concluded that eighty-two per cent of those between the ages of ten and twenty-nine use cell phones, and it is hard to overstate the utter absorption of the populace in the intimate portable worlds that these phones represent. A generation is growing up using their phones to shop, surf, play video games, and watch live TV, on Web sites specially designed for the mobile phone. "It used to be you would get on the train with junior-high-school girls and it would be noisy as hell with all their chatting," Yumiko Sugiura, a journalist who writes about Japanese youth culture, told me. "Now it's very quiet—just the little tapping of thumbs." (With the new iPhone and the advent of short-text delivery services like Twitter, American cellular habits are becoming increasingly Japanese; there are at least two U.S. sites, Quillpill and Textnovel, both in the beta stage, that offer templates for writing and reading fiction on cell phones.)

On a Japanese cell phone, you type the syllables of *hiragana* and *katakana*, and the phone suggests *kanji* from a list of words you use most frequently. Unlike working in longhand, which requires that an author know the complex strokes for several thousand *kanji*, and execute them well, writing on a cell phone lowers the barrier for a would-be novelist. The novels are correspondingly easy to read—most would pose no challenge to a ten-year-old—with short lines, simple words, and a repetitive vocabulary. Much of the writing is *hiragana*, and there is ample blank space to give the eyes a rest. "You're not trying to pack the screen," a cell-phone novelist named Rin told me. (Her name, as it happens, actually was borrowed from a dog: her best friend's Chihuahua.) "You're changing the line in the middle of sentences, so where you cut the sentence is an essential part. If you've got a very quiet scene, you use a lot more of those returns and spaces. When a couple is fighting, you'll cram the words together and make the screen very crowded." Quick and slangy, and filled with emoticons and dialogue, the stories have a tossed-off, spoken feel. Satoko Kan, the literature professor, said, "This is the average, ordinary girl talking to herself, the mumblings of her heart."

The Japanese publishing industry, which shrunk by more than twenty per cent over the past eleven years, has embraced cell-phone books. "Everyone is desperately trying to pursue that lifeboat," one analyst told me. Even established publishers have started hiring professionals to write for the market, distributing stories serially (often for a fee) on their own Web sites before bringing them out in print. In 2007, ninety-eight cell-phone novels were published. Miraculously, books have become cool accessories. "The cell-phone novel is an extreme success story of how social networks are used to build a product and launch it," Yoshida, the technology executive, says. "It's a group effort. Your fans support you and encourage you in the process of creating work—they help build the work. Then they buy the book to reaffirm their relationship to it in the first place." In October, the cover of *Popteen*, a magazine aimed at adolescent girls, featured a teenybopper with rhinestone necklaces and pink lipstick and an electric guitar strapped to her chest, wearing a pin that said, "I'd rather be reading."

Printed, the books announce themselves as untraditional, with horizontal lines that read left to right, as on the phone. "The industry saw that there was a new readership," one publishing executive said. "What happens when these girls get older? Will they ever grow up and start reading literature that is vertical? No one knows. But, in a world where everyone is texting and playing games on the Internet, the fact that these paper books are still valued is a good thing." Other conventions established on the screen are faithfully replicated in print. Often, the ink is colored or gray; black text is thought to be too imposing. "Some publishers removed the returns, but those books don't sell well," a representative of Goma Books said. "You need to keep that flow." Goma, which was founded twenty years ago, has emerged as a leading publisher of cell-phone novels. In April, through its Web site, it began releasing for cell phones Japanese literature on which the copyright has expired, including the work of Ryunosuke Akutagawa, Osamu Dazai, and Soseki Natsume. "Masterpieces in your pocket! Read horizontally!" the site declared. This summer, Goma began to print the books in cell-phone style. Its collection of Akutagawa stories, named for his classic short piece "The Spider's Thread," has horizontal blue-gray text and, for cover art, an image of a slender uniformed schoolgirl, lost in thought.

Despite its associations with the nubile and the rustic, the cell-phone novel was invented not by a teen-age girl pining in the provinces but by a Tokyo man in his mid-thirties. Yoshi, as he called himself, was a tutor at a cram school, and later had an office in Shibuya, the hub of youth culture in the nineties: he had plenty of opportunities to observe the beginning of the love affair between young women and their phones. By 2000, when Yoshi set up a Web site and started posting his novel, "Deep Love," Shibuya had been attracting media attention for several years as a center of *enjo kosai*, a form of prostitution in which schoolgirls trade sex with middle-aged men for money or designer clothes. Yoshi's seventeen-year-old heroine sells her body to pay for a heart operation for her boyfriend, Yoshiyuki, but—shades of O. Henry—the money never reaches him, and she dies of AIDS contracted from a client. Yoshi has said that the idea for the heroine's death came from a young reader who wrote to him that she got AIDS from *enjo kosai*. Self-published as a book, "Deep Love" sold a hundred thousand copies.

"This phrase—'a hundred thousand copies'—was what stopped me," Toshiya Arai, the executive director of Starts Publishing Company, said. At the time, Starts, which was founded as a real-estate company, was producing local shopping magazines and dining guides. "I thought this was unprecedented," Arai said. "I thought this person must be a liar, and I wanted to see him face to face." I met with Arai, a small man with sharp eyes and a mole dead center between his brows, and his colleague Shigeru Matsushima in a conference room at the company's office, near Tokyo Station. Arai said that in the summer of 2002 he visited Yoshi, who printed out for him a stack of e-mails from readers. "Nobody was saying that he was a great writer, or that his grammar was good," Arai recalled. "And yet his young fans were all writing about how his book had affected their lives and moved them." A few months later, Starts published "Deep Love," which was made into manga, a television drama, a film, and, eventually, a series of novels that sold 2.7 million copies. "It's a messed-up tale of love," Arai said. "Even among *keitai shosetsu*, it's a sordid adventure." Yoshi, who has left Tokyo and is living quietly in the countryside, has never revealed his name. According to his manager, "Yoshi personally thinks that background information about authors distracts readers when they are reading books."

Around the time that Yoshi started posting, Maho i-Land, which was founded in 1999, added a template called "Let's Make Novels" to its site. After the introduction of unlimited data-transmission packages for cell phones, in 2003, the number of novel writers and readers increased dramatically, an efflorescence as spontaneous as a grow-your-own-crystal set but no less marvellous. Toshiaki Ito, who worked at the company from 2004 to 2007, told me, "By the time I had joined, there was a culture for novels building up on the site. Inside the company, we understood that we had a lot of great content—we had a pile of jewels—and we discussed among ourselves what to do with this treasure chest we had accumulated."

The first of the Maho i-Land trove to be turned into a book was "What the Angel Gave Me," by Chaco, which Starts brought out in 2005. Last year, Arai said, Starts published twenty cell-phone novels, which accounted for nearly a third of the company's forty-three-million-dollar revenue. Mika's "Love Sky" is Starts's most popular title. When I asked Arai if I could meet Mika, he appeared nonplussed. "She is never photographed, and she does not respond to interviews," he said. "This is her wish, and what can we do but honor it? It's understood that the story is based on her experience." I pressed him for details about her identity. "She's twenty-four, and is a woman," he said at last.

"You're not supposed to say her age!" Matsushima, his colleague, snapped. He turned to me. "If you don't mind, could you just say that she's young?"

It was weeks before Mone agreed to see me. When we met, outside a tea shop at a busy intersection not far from Shibuya, she was wearing red tights and Eskimo boots and a meringue-shaped black knit cap with a pompom. Ito, the former Maho i-Land employee, had acted as our liaison, and he was there as a chaperon. As we walked up the street to a traditional Japanese restaurant for dinner, Mone trotted along on the balls of her feet, like a toddler.

Mone is short, with brown hair, curled lashes, and wide-set, placid eyes. She has a bow-shaped mouth and wayward canines—the right one sometimes pokes out through her closed lips, giving her the evil-sweet look of a Nara painting. She was reserved at first, picking daintily at the sashimi course. When a simmering dish of *motsunabe*—cow intestine, cabbage, and tofu—arrived, she took a picture of it with her phone, which was ornamented with a strawberry and a Teddy bear.

As the night progressed, Mone grew more animated. Her literary celebrity had left her feeling bitter—the novel had occasioned heated family fights—but she was mostly angry at herself. "I regret almost everything I've ever published," she said. "I could have done a lot to cover things up and I didn't. I feel a profound responsibility about that." The label of writer, she said, is unsuitable both to her and to the genre. "If I were some super-famous novelist, I would be running around saying, 'Hey, I'm a novelist.' But I'm not. I'm treated as this lame chick who's written one of those awful cell novels. Do you think I can be proud of that? It really depends on which side the public is going to join. I'm considered a total loser for having done it, and I myself think that, too." Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes glittered. "People say these horrible things about cell-phone novels, and I'm not sure they're mistaken. They say we're immature and incapable of writing a literate sentence. But I would say, so what? The fact that we're producing at all is important."

"Eternal Dream" sold two hundred thousand copies and by now has been accessed nearly three million times online; a sequel, also posted on Maho i-Land, was published in the summer of 2007, and sold eighty thousand copies. Mone calculates that she has made a little less than two hundred thousand dollars from her writing career. At dinner, I asked her if her life had changed in any way. "Not at all," she said. "You have to understand that at no point did I ever think this would feed me," she said. "I'm just another Japanese girl, no better or worse than any other girl walking down the street."

"Let's face it, the taxpayer dollar doesn't go as far as it once did."

• •

"The Tale of Genji," considered by many to be the world's first novel, was written a thousand years ago, in the Heian period, by a retainer of Empress Akiko at the Imperial Palace, in present-day Kyoto. The Heian was a time of literary productivity that also saw the composition of "The Pillow Book," Sei Shonagon's exquisitely detailed and refined record of court life, and a wealth of tanka poems. We know "Genji" 's author by the name Murasaki Shikibu—Murasaki, or Purple, being the name she gave her story's heroine, and Shikibu the name of the department (Bureau of Ceremonial) where her father at one time worked. Told episodically, and written mostly in *hiragana*, as women at the time were not supposed to learn *kanji*, it is the story of Genji, the beautiful son of the Emperor by a courtesan, who serially charms, seduces, and jilts women, from his rival's daughter to his stepmother and her young niece Murasaki. "Genji" is the epitome of official high culture—it is to the Japanese what the Odyssey is to the Greeks—but some have noticed certain parallels with Japan's new literary boom. "You have the intimate world of the court, and within that you have unwanted pregnancies, people picking on each other, jealousy," the managing director of a large publisher said. "If you simply translate the court for the school, you have the same jealousies and dramas. The structure of 'The Tale of Genji' is essentially the same as a cell-phone novel."

And so it was, in the spirit of continuity, that the third annual Japan Keitai Novel Award, a contest held by Starts, came to have a "Tale of Genji" theme. In late September, fifteen finalists, selected from a pool of thirty-three hundred and fifty who had submitted novels to the Starts Web site, arrived at a big hotel near Tokyo's Imperial Palace for the presentation ceremony. They formed a jittery line in a hallway on the second floor: Saya ♪, in a ruched gray dress, had written "☆ My vanished love child ☆ fourteen-year-old pregnancy~ . . . What I really need to tell." White Fig, a graceful young woman with coiffed hair and a netted shawl around her bare shoulders, was the author of "highschoolgirl.co.jp." A doughy, caramel-skinned high-schooler in a sailor suit, clutching a cell phone adorned with hot-pink charms, stood with her parents. She was Kilala, the author of "I want to meet teacher," summarized on the press release as "She loved a man who was her teacher, but already married. Yet the love grows for this kind educator." Kiki ("I'm His Girl")—orangey hair, tartan-print baby-doll dress, pink patent-leather pumps—stomped around with the prize-pony gait of a runway model, and tried to keep her thigh-high stockings from falling down.

The contestants filed into a large ballroom, with pink chrysanthemum-patterned wall-to-wall carpeting, pink chairs, and a shimmering upside-down-wedding-cake chandelier. Strains of dream-sequence harp music filled the air. Seated near the front was Jakucho Setouchi, an eighty-six-year-old novelist and Buddhist nun, who was acting as an honorary judge. The author of searing autobiographical novels in her youth (before she took her vows, her name was Harumi Setouchi), she is a contributor to *Bungakukai* and in the mid-nineties published a contemporary-Japanese translation of "Genji" that became a best-seller. She turned around in her chair to greet the audience: flowing purple robe, white-and-gold brocade *kesa*, shiny bald head.

A government official in a neat suit stood up, and praised the novelists as modern-day Murasakis for their innovative use of 3G cell phones. "The intent of having developed this broadband is for people to use it to create culture, develop new business models, and integrate the provinces into the nation's cultural production," he said. "It's the thousandth anniversary of 'The Tale of Genji.' There was a flowering of culture at that time, and we have hopes that in our new era in Japan we will have the same kind of cultural influence. The authors here are leaders of this new flowering of activity." An announcer on a loudspeaker introduced the finalists, and each stood up and took a shallow bow. “There’s one more author, who does not wish to be seen,” the announcer added. “She’s in the room but doesn’t want to be known.”

Kiki won the grand prize. When her name was called, she looked startled, and slowly turned her head to the left and to the right, remaining lumpen in her chair. Finally, she advanced to the stage, pulling up her stockings and combing her fingers through her hair. She accepted a huge bouquet from a popular Ping-Pong champion. At the microphone, she wept. She said that she had written the novel for her boyfriend, to commemorate their love. The award was two million yen (some twenty thousand dollars) and publication by Starts.

After Kiki left the stage, laden with the flowers and a signed Ping-Pong paddle, Setouchi made an announcement. Since May, she said, she had been posting a novel on the Starts Web site, under the pen name Purple—the reference to Murasaki Shikibu likely sailed over her readers’ heads. Hers was a simple, though well-crafted, tale of a high-school girl, Yuri, who falls in love with a handsome, damaged boy called Hikaru, which is one of Genji’s names. Like Genji, Hikaru has an affair with his father’s wife and gets her pregnant. (Instead of emperor, Hikaru’s father is a corporate executive.) At first, Setouchi said, she had tried to write on her cell phone, but, finding it too difficult, she reverted to her customary medium—traditional Japanese writing paper and a fountain pen—and sent the manuscript to her publisher to convert.

“I’m an author,” Setouchi told the audience. “When you finish a novel, to sell tens of thousands would be a tough thing for us, but I see you selling millions. I must confess that I was a bit jealous in the beginning.” Then she offered them a word of advice that was probably redundant. “I’m eighty-six years old now, and I don’t usually get surprised by things and I don’t get so excited, but as long as you’re alive you want to be excited, right? But how do you stay excited about life? Keep secrets.”

Kiki and her novel were big news. On the social-networking site Mixi, groups organized for and against, debating the merits of her style. The voice of “I’m His Girl” is jivey and loose, unabashedly frank (“Kids?/Well/Twice I got knocked up/By mistake—/Like who asked them to get made/I/Don’t like rubbers/Yeah/For beer and c-cks/Raw is best/You know”), and seasoned with slang expressions, like *se-fure*, for “sex friend,” and *mitaina*, a filler word that is the equivalent of “like, you know.” The day after the award, a site offering to “convert your blog into the best cell-phone style in 2008” went up on the Internet. All a user had to do was plug in a URL and push a Send key marked “*mitaina*” and the text would be transformed into a snaky uneven column of short lines, punctuated with random occurrences of the word *mitaina*. A message accompanied the translated blogs: “This text was automatically converted to cell-phone novel—here and there line breaks look strange. So what? *Mitaina*.”

Kiki didn’t go to college. In high school, she got F’s in Japanese. She’s twenty-three now, and lives with her boyfriend in a backwater town in Hokkaido, in northern Japan. She has worked in child care, and recently completed a mail-order course in how to look after the elderly. When I spoke to her after her win, she told me that she had written the book because “I was looking back on a difficult thing I had just come through, and I wanted to get it off my chest.” She said, “Putting it into this form cleared my mind.” In the novel, Aki, the female protagonist, gives up her free-love life style when she falls for a man named Tomo; then she gets pregnant, loses the baby, loses Tomo, and regains Tomo’s love at the story’s end. Kiki said her real name was similar to her heroine’s. “I thought I would be more engaged in the story if her name was close to my own,” she said.

I asked Kiki whether she had read “The Tale of Genji.” “The problem is the language is so difficult,” she said. “There are so many characters.” Then she remembered a book she’d read that was a “super-old one, an ancient one!” She said, “I read it four years ago. Before that, I didn’t read books of any kind, but it was very easy to read, very contemporary, very close to my life.” She told me that the title was “Deep Love.” ♦

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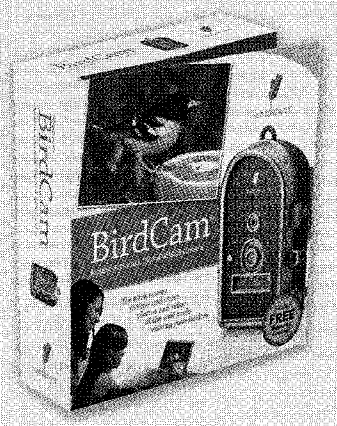

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FICTION

SOME WOMEN

BY ALICE MUNRO

NIALL O'LEARY/MILLENNIUM IMAGES

I am amazed sometimes to think how old I am. I can remember when the streets of the town I lived in were sprinkled with water to lay the dust in summer, and when girls wore waist cinchers and crinolines that could stand up by themselves, and when there was nothing much to be done about things like polio and leukemia. Some people who got polio got better, crippled or not, but people with leukemia went to bed, and, after some weeks' or months' decline in a tragic atmosphere, they died.

It was because of such a case that I got my first job, in the summer holidays, when I was thirteen.

Old Mrs. Crozier lived on the other side of town. Her stepson, Bruce, who was usually called Young Mr. Crozier, had come safely home from the war, where he had been a fighter pilot, had gone to college and studied history, and got married, and now he had leukemia. He and his wife were staying with Old Mrs. Crozier. The wife, Sylvia, taught summer school two afternoons a week at the college where they had met, some forty miles away. I was hired to look after Young Mr. Crozier while she wasn't there. He was in bed in the front-corner bedroom upstairs, and he could still get to the bathroom by himself. All I had to do was bring him fresh water and pull the shades up or down and see what he wanted when he rang the little bell on his bedside table.

Usually what he wanted was to have the fan moved. He liked the breeze it created but was disturbed by the noise. So he'd want the fan in the room for a while and then he'd want it out in the hall, but close to his open door.

When my mother heard about this, she wondered why they hadn't put him in a bed downstairs, where they surely had high ceilings and he would have been cooler.

I told her that they did not have any bedrooms downstairs.

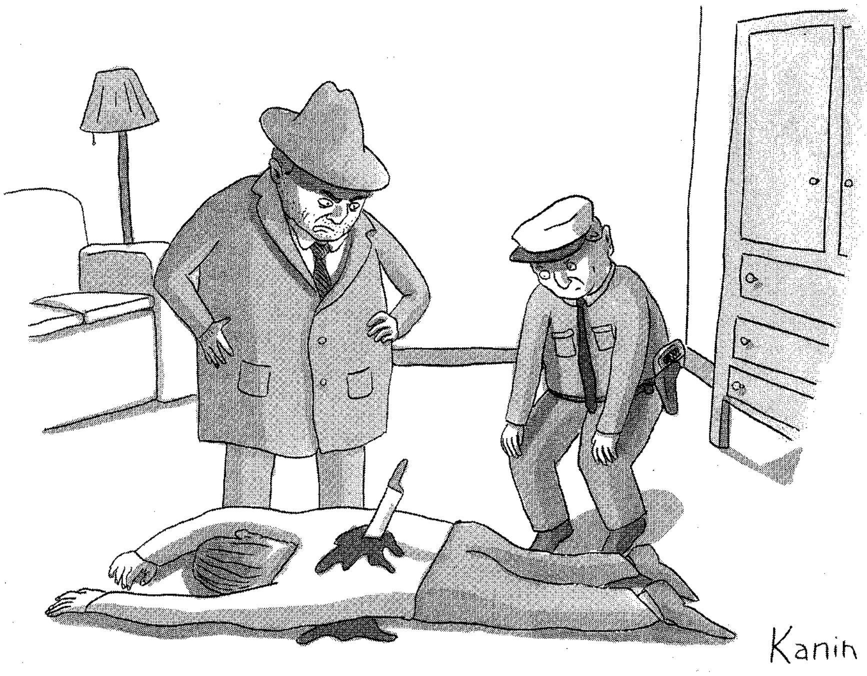
"Well, my heavens, couldn't they fix one up? Temporarily?"

That showed how little she knew about the Crozier household and the rule of Old Mrs. Crozier. Old Mrs. Crozier walked with a cane. She made one ominous-sounding journey up the stairs to see her stepson on the afternoons that I was there, and I suppose no more than that on the afternoons when I was not. But the idea of a bedroom downstairs would have outraged her as much as the notion of a toilet in the parlor. Fortunately, there was already a toilet downstairs, behind the kitchen, but I was sure that, if the upstairs one had been the only one, she would have made the laborious climb as often as necessary, rather than pursue a change so radical and unnerving.

My mother was thinking of going into the antique business, so she was very interested in the inside of the Crozier house, which was old and far grander than ours. She did get in, once, my very first afternoon there. I was in the kitchen, and I stood petrified, hearing her yoo-hoo and my own merrily called name. Then her perfunctory knock, her steps on the kitchen stairs. And Old Mrs. Crozier stumping out from the sunroom.

My mother said that she had just dropped by to see how her daughter was getting along. "She's all right," Old Mrs. Crozier said, standing in the hall doorway, blocking the view of antiques. My mother made a few more mortifying remarks and took herself off. That night, she said that Old Mrs. Crozier had no manners, because she was only a second wife, picked up on a business trip to Detroit, which was why she smoked and dyed her hair black as tar and put on lipstick like a smear of jam. She was not even the mother of the invalid upstairs. She did not have the brains to be. (We were having one of our fights then, this one relating to her visit, but that is neither here nor there.)

The way Old Mrs. Crozier saw it, I must have seemed just as intrusive as my mother, just as cheerily self-regarding. Shortly after I began working there, I went into the back parlor and opened the bookcase and took stock of the Harvard Classics set out in a perfect row. Most of them discouraged me, but I took out one that looked like it might be



"Nope. Looks to me like a clear-cut case of suicide by somehow reaching around behind the back and sticking a knife in backward. Let's get a drink."

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fiction, despite its foreign title, "I Promessi Sposi." It was fiction all right, and it was in English.

I must have had the idea then that all books were free, wherever you found them. Like water from a public tap.

When Old Mrs. Crozier saw me with the book, she asked where I had got it and what I was doing with it. From the bookcase, I said, and I had brought it upstairs to read. The thing that most perplexed her seemed to be that I had got it downstairs but brought it upstairs. The reading part she appeared to let go, as if such an activity were too alien for her to contemplate. Finally, she said that if I wanted a book I should bring one from home.

Of course, there were books in the sickroom. Reading seemed to be acceptable there. But they were mostly open and face down, as if Mr. Crozier just read a little here and there, then put them aside. And their titles did not tempt me. "Civilization on Trial." "The Great Conspiracy Against Russia."

My grandmother had warned me that if I could help it I should not touch anything that the patient had touched, because of germs, and I should always keep a cloth between my fingers and his water glass.

My mother said that leukemia did not come from germs.

"So what does it come from?" my grandmother said.

"The medical men don't know."

"Hunh."

It was Young Mrs. Crozier who picked me up and drove me home, though the distance across town was not far. She was a tall, thin, fair-haired woman with a variable complexion. Sometimes there were patches of red on her cheeks as if she had scratched them. Word had been passed that she was older than her husband, that he had been her student at college. My mother said that nobody seemed to have got around to figuring out that, since he was a war veteran, he could easily have been her student without that making her older. People were just down on her because she had got an education.

Another thing they said was that she should have stayed home and looked after him, as she had promised in the marriage ceremony, instead of going out to teach. My mother again defended her, saying that it was only two afternoons a week and she had to keep up her profession, seeing as how she would be on her own soon enough. And if she didn't get out of the old lady's way once in a while wouldn't you think she'd go crazy? My mother always defended women who worked, and my grandmother always got after her for it.

One day I tried a conversation with Young Mrs. Crozier, Sylvia. She was the only college graduate I knew. Except for her husband, of course, and he had stopped counting.

"Did Toynbee write history books?"

"Beg pardon? Oh. Yes."

None of us mattered to her—not me, or her critics or her defenders. We were no more than bugs on a lampshade.

As for Old Mrs. Crozier, all she really cared about was her flower garden. She had a man who came and helped her; he was about her age, but more limber than she was. His name was Hervey. He lived on our street, and, in fact, it was through him that she had heard about me as a possible employee. At home, he only gossiped and grew weeds, but here he plucked and mulched and fussed, while she followed him around, leaning on her stick and shaded by her big straw hat. Sometimes she sat on a bench, still commenting and giving orders, and smoking a cigarette. Early on, I dared to go between the perfect hedges to ask if she or her helper would like a glass of water, and she cried out, "Mind my borders!" before saying no.

Flowers were never brought into the house. Some poppies had escaped and were growing wild beyond the hedge, almost on the road, so I asked if I could pick a bouquet to brighten the sickroom.

"They'd only die," Mrs. Crozier said, not seeming to realize that this remark had a double edge to it, under the circumstances.

Certain suggestions or notions would make the muscles of her lean spotty face quiver, her eyes go sharp and black, and her mouth work as if there were a despicable taste in it. She could stop you in your tracks then, like a savage thornbush.

The two days a week that I worked were not consecutive. Let us say they were Tuesdays and Thursdays. The first day, I was alone with the sick man and Old Mrs. Crozier. The second day, somebody arrived whom I had not been told about. I was sitting upstairs when I heard a car in the driveway, and someone running briskly up the back steps and entering the kitchen without knocking. Then the person called "Dorothy," which I had not known was Old Mrs. Crozier's name. The voice was a woman's or a girl's, and it was bold and teasing all at once.

I ran down the back stairs, saying, "I think she's in the sunroom."

"Holy Toledo! Who are you?"

I told her who I was and what I was doing there, and the young woman said that her name was Roxanne.

"I'm the masseuse."

I didn't like being caught by a word I didn't know. I didn't say anything, but she saw how things were.

"Got you stumped, eh? I give massages. You ever heard of that?"

Now she was unpacking the bag she had with her. Various pads and cloths and flat velour-covered brushes appeared.

"I'll need some hot water to warm these up," she said. "You can heat me some in the kettle." (The Crozier house was grand, but there was still only cold water on tap, as in my house at home.)

Roxanne had sized me up, apparently, as somebody who was willing to take orders—especially, perhaps, orders given in such a coaxing voice. And she was right, though she may not have guessed that my willingness had more to do with my own curiosity than with her charm.

She was tanned, although it was still early in the summer, and her pageboy hair had a copper sheen—something that you could get easily from a bottle nowadays but that was unusual and enviable then. Brown eyes, a dimple in one cheek—she did so much smiling and joking that you never got a good enough look at her to say whether she was really pretty, or how old she was.

I was impressed by the way her rump curved out handsomely to the back, instead of spreading to the sides.

I learned quickly that she was new in town, married to the mechanic at the Esso station, and that she had two little boys, one four years old and one three. ("It took me a while to figure out what was causing them," she said, with one of her conspiratorial twinkles.)

In Hamilton, where they used to live, she had trained to be a masseuse and it had turned out to be just the sort of thing she'd always had a knack for.

"*Dor*-thee?"

"She's in the sunroom," I told her again.

"I know, I'm just kidding her. Now, maybe you don't know about getting a massage, but when you get one you got to take off all your clothes. Not such a problem when you're young, but when you're older, you know, you can get all embarrassed."

She was wrong about one thing, at least as far as I was concerned. About its not being a problem to take off all your clothes when you're young.

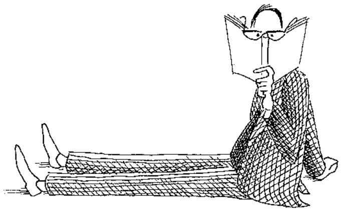
"So maybe you should skedaddle. You're supposed to be upstairs anyway, aren't you?"

This time I took the front staircase, while she was busy with the hot water. That way I got a glance in through the open door of the sunroom—which was not much of a sunroom at all, having its windows on three sides all filled up with the fat leaves of catalpa trees. There I saw Old Mrs. Crozier stretched out on a daybed, on her stomach, her face turned away from me, absolutely naked. A skinny streak of pale flesh. The usually covered length of her body didn't look as old as the parts of her that were daily exposed—her freckled, dark-veined hands and forearms, her brown-blotched cheeks. The skin of her back and legs was yellow-white, like wood freshly stripped of its bark.

I sat on the top step and listened to the sounds of the massage. Thumps and grunts. Roxanne's voice bossy now, cheerful but full of exhortation.

"Stiff knot here. Oh, brother. I'm going to have to whack you one. Just kidding. Aw, come on, just loosen up for me. You know, you got nice skin here. Small of your back—what do they say? It's like a baby's bum. Now I gotta bear down a bit—you're going to feel it here. Take away the tension. Good girl."

Old Mrs. Crozier was making little yelps. Sounds of complaint and gratitude. It went on for quite a while, and I got bored. I went back to reading some old *Canadian Home Journals* that I had found in a cabinet. I read recipes and checked on old-time fashions till I heard Roxanne say, "Now I'll just clean this stuff up and we'll go on upstairs, like you said."



Upstairs. I slid the magazines back into their place in the cabinet that my mother would have coveted, and went into Mr. Crozier's room. He was asleep, or at least he had his eyes closed. I moved the fan a few inches and smoothed his cover and went and stood by the window, twiddling with the blind.

Sure enough, there came a noise on the back stairs, Old Mrs. Crozier with her slow and threatening cane steps, Roxanne running ahead and calling, "Look out, look out, wherever you are. We're coming to get you, wherever you are."

Mr. Crozier had his eyes open now. Behind his usual weariness was a faint expression of alarm. But before he could pretend to be asleep again Roxanne burst into the room.

"So here's where you're hiding. I just told your stepmom I thought it was about time I got introduced to you."

Mr. Crozier said, "How do you do, Roxanne?"

"How did you know my name?"

"Word gets around."

"Fresh fellow you got here," Roxanne said to Old Mrs. Crozier, who now came stumping into the room.

"Stop fooling around with that blind," Old Mrs. Crozier said to me. "Go and fetch me a drink of cool water, if you want something to do. Not cold, just cool."

"You're a mess," Roxanne said to Mr. Crozier. "Who gave you that shave and when was it?"

"A few days ago," he said. "I handle it myself as well as I can."

"That's what I thought," Roxanne said. And to me, "When you're getting her water, how'd you like to heat some more up for me and I'll undertake to give him a decent shave?"

Shaving him became a regular thing, once a week, following the massage. Roxanne told Mr. Crozier that first day not to worry. "I'm not going to pound on you like you must have heard me doing to Dorothy-doodle downstairs. Before I got my massage training I used to be a nurse. Well, a nurse's aide. One of the ones who do all the work and then the nurses come around and boss you. Anyway, I learned how to make people comfortable."

Dorothy-doodle? Mr. Crozier grinned. But the odd thing was that Old Mrs. Crozier grinned, too.

Roxanne shaved him deftly. She sponged his face and neck and torso and arms and hands. She pulled his sheets around, somehow managing not to disturb him, and she punched and rearranged his pillows. Talking all the while, pure nonsense.

"Dorothy, you're a liar. You said you had a sick man upstairs, and I walk in here and I think, Where's the sick man? I don't see a sick man around here. Do I?"

Mr. Crozier said, "What would you say I am, then?"

"Recovering. That's what I would say. I don't mean you should be up and running around, I'm not so stupid as all that. I know you need your bed rest. But I say recovering. Nobody who was sick like you're supposed to be ever looked as good as what you do."

I thought this flirtatious prattle insulting. Mr. Crozier looked terrible. A tall man whose ribs showed like those of a famine survivor when she sponged him, whose head was partly bald, and whose skin looked as if it had the texture of a plucked chicken's, his neck corded like an old man's. Whenever I had waited on him in any way I had avoided looking at him. Though this was not really because he was sick and ugly. It was because he was dying. I would have felt a similar reticence even if he had been angelically handsome. I was aware of an atmosphere of death in the house, which grew thicker as you approached his room, and he was at the center of it, like the Host the Catholics kept in the box so powerfully called the tabernacle. He was the one stricken, marked out from everybody else, and here was Roxanne trespassing on his ground with her jokes and her swagger and her notions of entertainment.

On her second visit, she asked him what he did all day.

"Read sometimes. Sleep."

And how did he sleep at night?

"If I can't sleep I lie awake. Think. Sometimes read."

"Doesn't that disturb your wife?"

"She sleeps in the back bedroom."

"Uh-huh. You need some entertainment."

"Are you going to sing and dance for me?"

I saw Old Mrs. Crozier look aside with her odd involuntary grin.

"Don't you get cheeky," Roxanne said. "Are you up to cards?"

"I hate cards."

"Well, have you got Chinese checkers in the house?"

Roxanne directed this question at Old Mrs. Crozier, who first said she had no idea, then wondered if there might be a board in a drawer of the dining-room buffet.

So I was sent down to look and came back with the board and a jar of marbles.

Roxanne set the game up over Mr. Crozier's legs, and she and I and Mr. Crozier played, Old Mrs. Crozier saying that she had never understood the game or been able to keep her marbles straight. (To my surprise, she seemed to offer this as a joke.) Roxanne might squeal when she made a move or groan whenever somebody jumped over one of her marbles, but she was careful never to disturb the patient. She held her body still and set her marbles down like feathers. I tried to do the same, because she would widen her eyes warningly at me if I didn't. All without losing her dimple.

I remembered Young Mrs. Crozier, Sylvia, saying to me in the car that her husband did not welcome conversation. It tired him out, she told me, and when he was tired he could become irritable. So I thought, If ever there was a time for him to become irritable, it's now. Being forced to play a silly game on his deathbed, when you could feel his fever in the sheets.

But Sylvia must have been wrong. He had developed greater patience and courtesy than she was perhaps aware of. With inferior people—Roxanne was surely an inferior person—he made himself tolerant, gentle. When likely all he wanted to do was lie there and meditate on the pathways of his life and gear up for his future.

Roxanne patted the sweat off his forehead, saying, "Don't get excited. You haven't won yet!"

"Roxanne," he said. "Roxanne. Do you know whose name that was, Roxanne?"

"Hmm?" she said, and I broke in. I couldn't help it.

"It was Alexander the Great's wife's name." My head was a magpie's nest lined with such bright scraps of information.

"Is that so?" Roxanne said. "And who is that supposed to be? Great Alexander?"

I realized something when I looked at Mr. Crozier at that moment. Something shocking, saddening.

He *liked* her not knowing. Her ignorance was a pleasure that melted on his tongue, like a lick of toffee.

On the first day, she had worn shorts, as I did, but the next time and always after that Roxanne wore a dress of some stiff and shiny light-green material. You could hear it rustle as she ran up the stairs. She brought a fleecy pad for Mr. Crozier, so that he would not develop bedsores. She was dissatisfied with the arrangement of his bedclothes, always had to put them to rights. But however she scolded her movements never irritated him, and she made him admit to feeling more comfortable afterward.

She was never at a loss. Sometimes she came equipped with riddles. Or jokes. Some of the jokes were what my mother would have called smutty and would not have allowed around our house, except when they came from certain of my father's relatives, who had practically no other kind of conversation.

These jokes usually started off with serious-sounding but absurd questions.

Did you hear about the nun who went shopping for a meat grinder?

Did you hear what the bride and groom went and ordered for dessert on their wedding night?

The answers always came with a double meaning, so that whoever told the joke could pretend to be shocked and accuse the listener of having a dirty mind.

And after she had got everybody used to her telling these jokes Roxanne went on to the sort of joke I didn't believe my mother knew existed, often involving sex with sheep or hens or porcupines.

"Isn't that awful?" she always said at the finish. She said she wouldn't know this stuff if her husband didn't bring it home from the garage.

The fact that Old Mrs. Crozier snickered disturbed me as much as the jokes themselves. I wondered if she didn't actually get the jokes but simply enjoyed listening to whatever Roxanne said. She sat there with that chewed-in yet absent-minded smile on her face, as if she'd been given a present that she knew she'd like, even though she hadn't got the wrapping off it yet.

Mr. Crozier didn't laugh, but he never laughed, really. He raised his eyebrows, pretending to disapprove, as if he found Roxanne outrageous but endearing all the same. I tried to tell myself that this was just good manners, or gratitude for her efforts, whatever they might be.

I myself made sure to laugh so that Roxanne would not put me down as an innocent prig.

The other thing she did to keep things lively was tell us about her life—how she had come down from some lost little town in northern Ontario to Toronto to visit her older sister, when she was only fourteen, then got a job at Eaton's, first cleaning up in the cafeteria, then being noticed by one of the managers, because she worked fast and was always cheerful, and suddenly finding herself a salesgirl in the glove department. (She made this sound like being discovered by Warner Bros.) And who should have come in one day but Barbara Ann Scott, the skating star, who bought a pair of elbow-length white kid gloves.

Meanwhile, Roxanne's sister had so many boyfriends that she'd flip a coin to see whom she'd go out with almost every night, and she employed Roxanne to meet the rejects regretfully at the front door of the rooming house where they lived, while she herself and her pick of the night sneaked out the back. Roxanne said that maybe that was how she had developed such a gift of gab. And pretty soon some of the boys she had met this way were taking her out, instead of her sister. They did not know her real age.

"I had me a ball," she said.

I began to understand that there were certain talkers—certain girls—whom people liked to listen to, not because of what they, the girls, had to say but because of the delight they took in saying it. A delight in themselves, a shine on their faces, a conviction that whatever they were telling was remarkable and that they themselves could not help but give pleasure. There might be other people—people like me—who didn't concede this, but that was their loss. And people like me would never be the audience these girls were after, anyway.

Mr. Crozier sat propped up on his pillows and looked for all the world as if he were happy. Happy just to close his eyes and let her talk, then open his eyes and find her still there, like a chocolate bunny on Easter morning. And then with his eyes open follow every twitch of her candy lips and sway of her sumptuous bottom.

The time Roxanne spent upstairs was as long as the time she spent downstairs, giving the massage. I wondered if she was being paid. If she wasn't, how could she afford to stay so long? And who could be paying her but Old Mrs. Crozier?

Why?

To keep her stepson happy and comfortable? To keep herself entertained in a curious way?

One afternoon, when Roxanne had gone downstairs, Mr. Crozier said that he felt thirstier than usual. I went to get him some more water from the pitcher that was always in the refrigerator. Roxanne was packing up to go home.

"I never meant to stay so late," she said. "I wouldn't want to run into that schoolteacher."

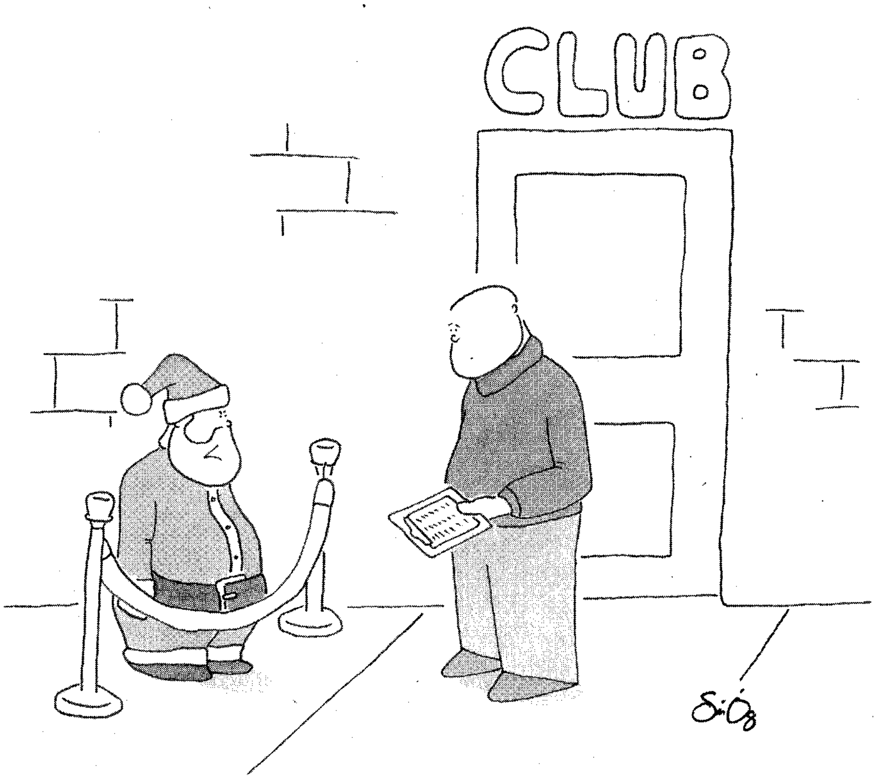
I didn't understand for a moment.

"You know. *Syl-vi-a.* She's not crazy about me, either, is she? She ever mention me when she drives you home?"

I said that Sylvia had never mentioned Roxanne to me during any of our drives.

"Dorothy says she doesn't know how to handle him. She says I make him a lot happier than what she does. Dorothy says that. I wouldn't be surprised if she even told her that to her face."

I thought of how Sylvia ran upstairs to her husband's room every afternoon when she got home, before even speaking to me or her mother-in-law, her face flushed with eagerness and desperation. I wanted to say something about that—I wanted to defend her—



"Not on the list? I invented the list!"

but I didn't know how. And people as confident as Roxanne often seemed to get the better of me.

"You sure she never says anything about me?"

I said again that she didn't. "She's tired when she gets home."

"Yeah. Everybody's tired. Some just learn to act like they aren't."

I did say something then, to balk her. "I quite like her."

"You *qwat* like her?" Roxanne mocked.

Playfully, sharply, she jerked at a strand of the bangs I had recently cut for myself.

"You ought to do something decent with your hair."

Dorothy says.

If Roxanne wanted admiration, which was her nature, what was it that Old Mrs. Crozier wanted? I had a feeling that there was mischief stirring, but I could not pin it down. Maybe it was just a desire to have Roxanne, her liveliness, in the house, double time?

Midsummer passed. Water was low in the wells. The sprinkler truck stopped coming and some stores put up sheets of what looked like yellow cellophane in their windows to keep their goods from fading. Leaves were spotty, the grass dry.

Old Mrs. Crozier kept her garden man hoeing, day after day. That's what you do in dry weather, hoe and hoe to bring up any moisture that you can find in the ground underneath.

Summer school at the college would end after the second week of August, and then Sylvia Crozier would be home every day.

Mr. Crozier still seemed glad to see Roxanne, but he often fell asleep. He could drift off without letting his head fall back, during one of her jokes or anecdotes. Then after a moment he would wake up again and ask where he was.

"Right here, you sleepy noodle. You're supposed to be paying attention to me. I should bat you one. Or how about I try tickling you instead?"

Anybody could see how he was failing. There were hollows in his cheeks like an old man's, and the light shone through the tops of his ears, as if they were not flesh but plastic. (Though we didn't say plastic then; we said celluloid.)

My last day of work, Sylvia's last day of teaching, was a massage day. Sylvia had to leave for the college early, because of some ceremony, so I walked across town, arriving when Roxanne was already there. She and Old Mrs. Crozier were in the kitchen, and they both looked at me as if they had forgotten I was coming, as if I had interrupted them.

"I ordered them specially," Old Mrs. Crozier said.

She must have been talking about the macaroons sitting in the baker's box on the table.

"Yeah, but I told you," Roxanne said. "I can't eat that stuff. Not no way no how."

"I sent Hervey down to the bakeshop to get them."

"O.K., let Hervey eat them. I'm not kidding—I break out something awful."

"I thought we'd have a treat," Old Mrs. Crozier said. "Seeing it's the last day we've got before—"

"Last day before she parks her butt here permanently? Yeah, I know. Doesn't help to have me breaking out like a spotted hyena."

Who was it whose butt was parked permanently?

Sylvia's. Sylvia.

Old Mrs. Crozier was wearing a beautiful black silk wrapper, with water lilies and geese on it. She said, "No chance of having anything special with her around. You'll see. You won't be able to even get to see him with her around."

"So let's get going and get some time today. Don't bother about this stuff. It's not your fault. I know you got it to be nice."

" 'I know you got it to be nice,' " Old Mrs. Crozier imitated in a mean, mincing voice, and then they both looked at me, and Roxanne said, "Pitcher's where it always is."

I took Mr. Crozier's water out of the fridge. It occurred to me that they could offer me one of the golden macaroons sitting in the box, but apparently it did not occur to them.

I'd expected Mr. Crozier to be lying back on the pillows with his eyes closed, but he was wide awake.

"I've been waiting," he said, and took a breath. "For you to get here," he said. "I want to ask you—do something for me. Will you?"

I said sure.

"Keep it a secret?"

I had been worried that he might ask me to help him to the commode that had recently appeared in his room, but surely that would not have to be a secret.

He told me to go to the bureau across from his bed and open the left-hand drawer, and see if I could find a key there.

I did so. I found a large, heavy, old-fashioned key.

He wanted me to go out of his room and shut the door and lock it. Then hide the key in a safe place, perhaps in the pocket of my shorts.

I was not to tell anybody what I had done.

I was not to let anybody know I had the key until his wife came home, and then I was to give it to her privately. Did I understand?

O.K.

He thanked me.

O.K.

All the time he was talking to me there was a film of sweat on his face and his eyes were as bright as if Roxanne were in the room.

"Nobody is to get in."

"Nobody is to get in," I repeated.

"Not my stepmother or—Roxanne. Just my wife."

I locked the door from the outside and put the key in my pocket. But then I was afraid that it could be seen through the light cotton material, so I went downstairs and into the back parlor and hid it between the pages of "I Promessi Sposi." I knew that Roxanne and Old Mrs. Crozier would not hear me, because the massage was going on, and Roxanne was using her professional voice.

"I got my work cut out for me getting these knots out of you today."

And I heard Old Mrs. Crozier's voice, full of her new displeasure.

" . . . punching harder than you normally do."

"Well, I gotta."

I was headed upstairs when a further thought came to me.

If he had locked the door himself—which was evidently what he wanted the others to think—and I had been sitting on the top step as usual, I would certainly have heard him and called out and roused the others in the house. So I went back down and sat on the bottom step of the front stairs, a position from which I could conceivably not have heard a thing.

The massage seemed to be brisk and businesslike today; Roxanne was evidently not making jokes. Pretty soon I could hear her running up the back stairs.

She stopped. She said, "Hey, Bruce."

Bruce.

She rattled the knob of the door.

"Bruce."

Then she must have put her mouth to the keyhole, so that he would hear but nobody else would. I could not make out exactly what she was saying, but I could tell that she was pleading. First teasing, then pleading. After a while she sounded as if she were saying her prayers.

When she gave that up, she started pounding on the door with her fists, not too hard but urgently.

Eventually, she stopped that, too.

"Come on," she said in a firmer voice. "If you got to the door to lock it, you can get there to open it up."

Nothing happened. She came and looked over the bannister and saw me.

"Did you take Mr. Crozier's water into his room?"

I said yes.

"So his door wasn't locked or anything then?"

No.

"Did he say anything to you?"

"He just said thanks."

"Well, he's got his door locked and I can't get him to answer."

I heard Old Mrs. Crozier's stick reaching the top of the back stairs.

"What's the commotion up here?"

"He's locked hisself in and I can't get him to answer me."

"What do you mean, locked himself in? Likely the door's stuck. Wind blew it shut and it stuck."

There was no wind that day.

"Try it yourself," Roxanne said. "It's locked."

"I wasn't aware there was a key to this door," Old Mrs. Crozier said, as if her not being aware could negate the fact. Then, perfunctorily, she tried the knob and said, "Well. It'd appear to be locked."

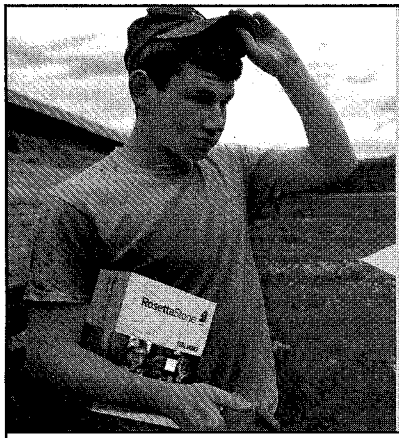
He had counted on this, I thought. That they would not suspect me, that they would assume that he was in charge. And in fact he was.

"We have to get in," Roxanne said. She gave the door a kick.

"Stop that," Old Mrs. Crozier said. "Do you want to wreck the door? You couldn't get through it, anyway—it's solid oak. Every door in this house is solid oak."

"Then we have to call the police."

There was a pause.



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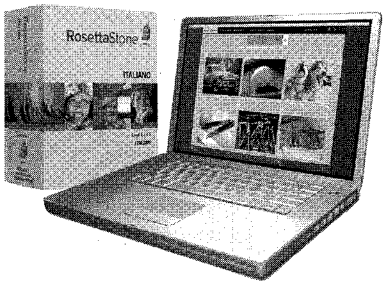

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"They could get up to the window," Roxanne said.

Old Mrs. Crozier drew in her breath and spoke decisively. "You don't know what you are saying. I won't have the police in this house. I won't have them climbing all over my walls like caterpillars."

"We don't know what he could be doing in there."

"Well, then, that's up to him. Isn't it?"

Another pause.

Now steps—Roxanne's—retreating to the back staircase.

"Yes. You'd better just take yourself away before you forget whose house this is."

Roxanne was going down the stairs. A couple of stomps of the stick went after her, then stopped.

"And don't get the idea you'll go to the constable behind my back. He's not going to take his orders from you. Who gives the orders around here, anyway? It's certainly not you. You understand me?"

Very soon I heard the kitchen door slam shut. And then Roxanne's car start.

I was no more worried about the police than Old Mrs. Crozier was. The police in our town meant Constable McClarty, who came to the school to warn us about sledding on the streets in winter and swimming in the millrace in summer, both of which we continued to do. It was ridiculous to think of him climbing up a ladder or lecturing Mr. Crozier through a locked door.

He would tell Roxanne to mind her own business and let the Croziers mind theirs.

It was not ridiculous, however, to think of Old Mrs. Crozier giving orders, and I thought she might do so now that Roxanne—whom she apparently did not like anymore—was gone. But although I heard her go back to Mr. Crozier's door and stand there, she did not even rattle the knob. She just said one thing.

"Stronger than you'd think," she muttered. Then made her way downstairs. The usual punishing noises with her steady stick.

I waited awhile and then I went out to the kitchen. Old Mrs. Crozier wasn't there. She wasn't in either parlor or in the dining room or the sunroom. I got up my nerve and knocked on the toilet door, then opened it, and she was not there, either. Then I looked out the window over the kitchen sink and I saw her straw hat moving slowly along the cedar hedge. She was out in the garden in the heat, stumping along between her flower beds.

THE FIFTH SEASON

Say the law was based on whim.
The poor did not have to say the law was the sun.
The powerful did not have to be as fair
As they are. There was one person
Who was poor *and* powerful, like now,
Same old same old. A saint. Phooey.
Baloney. Secretly she owned Sony.
But say the rest of us lived apart from her
In the fifth season. No eternal four
In which I go out alone in the car,
Pass some yellow grass
That is yellow to my left and makes me dizzy
And yellow to my right and makes me unattached,
As it is colored so in summer in Stone Harbor or Portland or Carmel
Or in Denton, Texas, in ice storms, now,
In the four seasons. In the fifth season
Grass would be white in some clumps and pink in some clumps
Everywhere else on earth, like lower Broadway
Or the Champs-Élysées,
Or you name it, *except* the few areas or towns that
I just named where the four seasons were. So I say I said
Whim in the fifth season, a law covering nearly all the earth.
Manipulators could not manipulate,
Isn't that great?
Any one person could have a whim
That made counterfeit cash good
And he wouldn't be left holding the bag by counterfeiters, ruined,
Just the opposite, he'd be rolling in dough.
You could not rob a person with a pen,
Only oral contracts counted, but not for much,
And the serious people, like me, same old same old,
Sat and thought how to change the white grass,
And took a walk (only *in* the house) and thought
How to change the grass, both white and pink, back into the yellow,
The particular natural yellow that is hideous enough, plenty hideous.

—*Arthur Vogelsang*

I was not worried by the thought that seemed to have troubled Roxanne. I did not even stop to consider it, because I believed that it would be quite absurd for a person with only a short time to live to commit suicide.

All the same, I was nervous. I ate two of the macaroons that were still sitting on the kitchen table. I ate them hoping that pleasure would bring back normalcy, but I barely tasted them. Then I shoved the box into the refrigerator so that I would not hope to turn the trick by eating more.

Old Mrs. Crozier was still outside when Sylvia got home.

I retrieved the key from between the pages of the book as soon as I heard the car and I told Sylvia quickly what had happened, leaving out most of the fuss. She would not have waited to listen to it, anyway. She went running upstairs.

I stood at the bottom of the stairs to hear what I could hear.

Nothing. Nothing.

Then Sylvia's voice, surprised but in no way desperate, and too low for me to make out what she was saying. Within about five minutes she was downstairs, saying that it was time to get me home. She was flushed, as if the spots on her cheeks had spread all over her face, and she looked shocked, but unable to resist her happiness.

Then, "Oh. Where is Mother Crozier?"

"In the flower garden, I think."

"Well, I suppose I'd better speak to her, just for a moment."

After she had done that, she no longer looked quite so happy.

"I suppose you know," she said as she backed out the car. "I suppose you can imagine Mother Crozier is upset. Not that I am blaming you. It was very good and loyal of you. Doing what Mr. Crozier asked you to do. You weren't scared of anything happening, were you?"

I said no. Then I said, "I think Roxanne was."

"Mrs. Hoy? Yes. That's too bad."

As we were driving down what was known as Crozier's Hill, she said, "I don't think he wanted to frighten them. You know, when you're sick, sick for a long time, you can get not to appreciate other people's feelings. You can get turned against people even when they're doing what they can to help you. Mrs. Crozier and Mrs. Hoy were certainly trying their best. But Mr. Crozier just didn't feel that he wanted them around anymore today. He'd just had enough of them. You understand?"

She did not seem to know that she was smiling when she said this.

Mrs. Hoy.

Had I ever heard that name before?

And spoken so gently and respectfully, yet with light-years of condescension.

Did I believe what Sylvia had said?

I believed that it was what he had told her.

I did see Roxanne again that day. I saw her just as Sylvia was introducing me to this new name. Mrs. Hoy.

She—Roxanne—was in her car and she had stopped at the first cross street at the bottom of Crozier's Hill to watch us drive by. I didn't turn to look at her, because it was all too confusing, with Sylvia talking to me.

Of course, Sylvia would not have known whose car that was. She wouldn't have known that Roxanne must have been waiting to see what was going on, driving around the block all the time since she had left the Croziers' house.

Roxanne would have recognized Sylvia's car, though. She would have noticed me. She would have known that things were all right, from the kindly serious faintly smiling way that Sylvia was talking to me.

She didn't turn the corner and drive back up the hill to the Croziers' house. Oh, no. She drove across the street—I watched in the sideview mirror—toward the east part of town, where the wartime houses had been put up. That was where she lived.

"Feel the breeze," Sylvia said. "Maybe those clouds are going to bring us rain."

The clouds were high and white, glaring. They looked nothing like rain clouds, and there was a breeze only because we were in a moving car with the windows rolled down.

I understood pretty well the winning and losing that had taken place between Sylvia and Roxanne, but it was strange to think of the almost obliterated prize, Mr. Crozier—and to think that he could have had the will to make a decision, even to deprive himself, so late in his life. The carnality at death's door—or the true love, for that matter—was something I wanted to shake off back then, just as I would shake caterpillars off my sleeve.

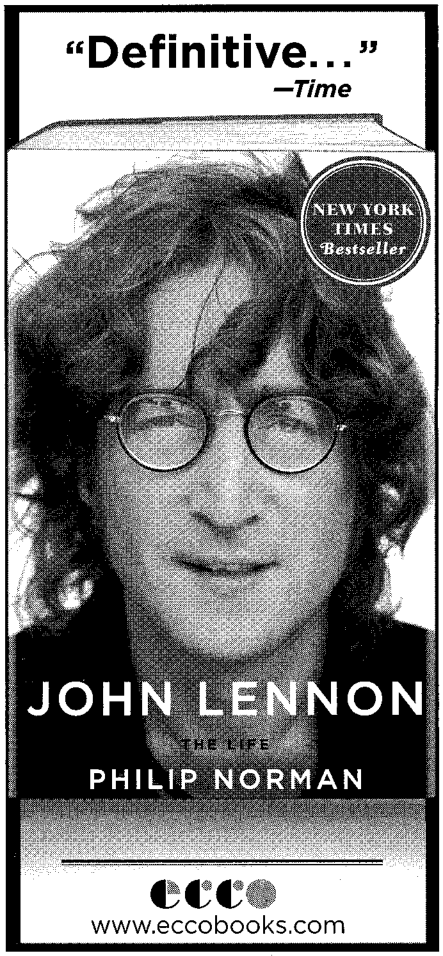
Sylvia took Mr. Crozier away to a rented cottage on the lake, where he died sometime before the leaves were off.

The Hoy family moved on, as mechanics' families often did.

My mother struggled with a crippling disease, which put an end to all her money-making dreams.

Dorothy Crozier had a stroke, but recovered, and famously bought Halloween candy for the children whose older brothers and sisters she had ordered from her door.

I grew up, and old. ♦



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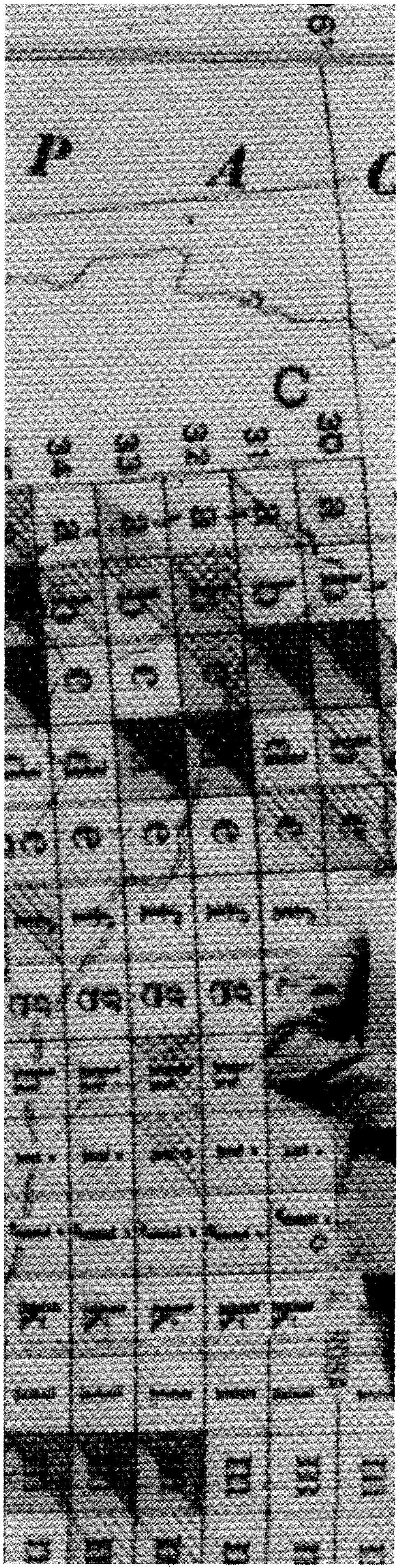
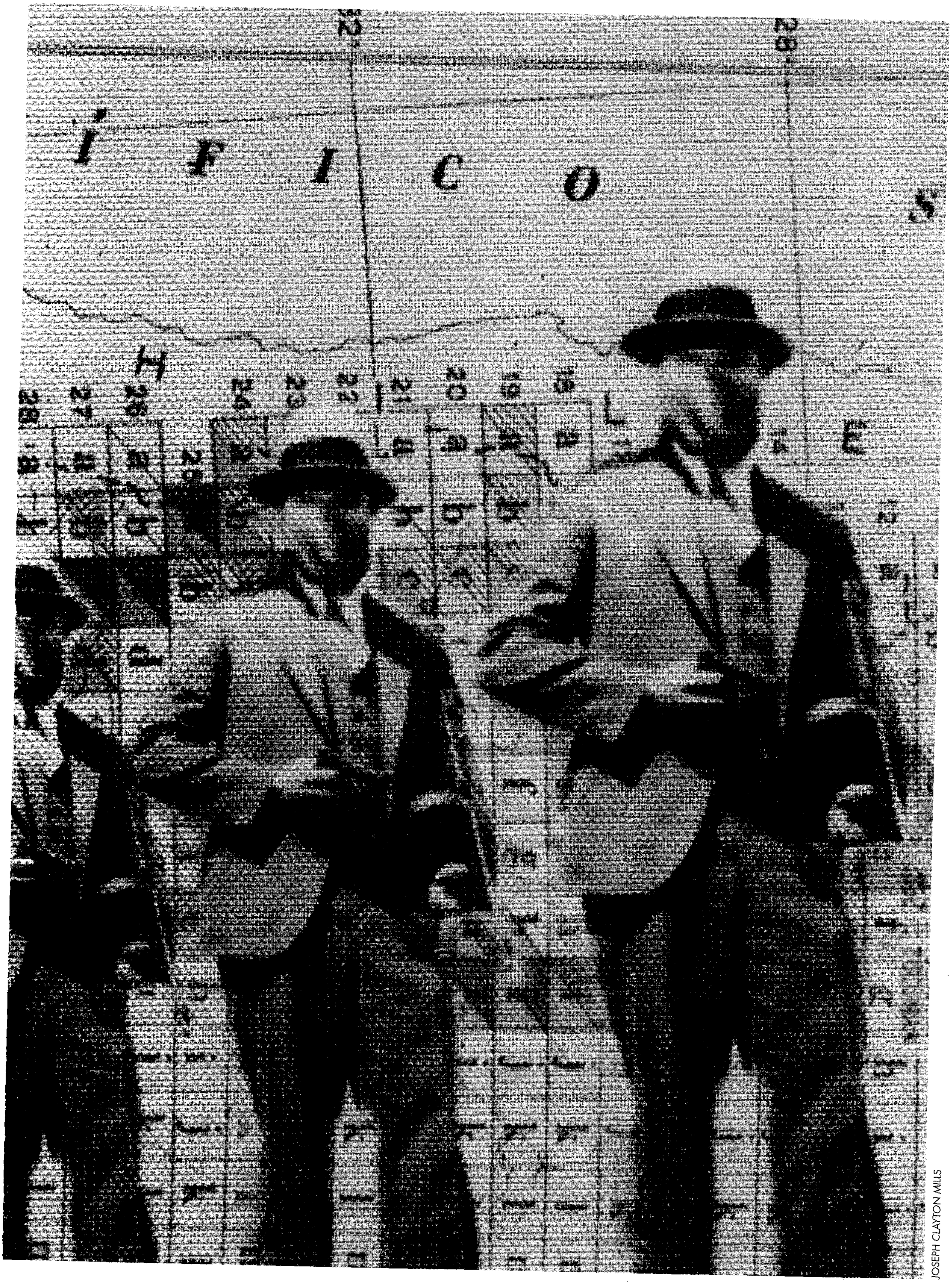
FICTION

MEETING WITH ENRIQUE LIHN

BY ROBERTO BOLAÑO

In 1999, after returning from Venezuela, I dreamed that I was being taken to Enrique Lihn's apartment, in a country that could well have been Chile, in a city that could well have been Santiago, bearing in mind that Chile and Santiago once resembled Hell, a resemblance that, in some subterranean layer of the real city and the imaginary city, will forever remain. Of course, I knew that Lihn was dead, but when the people I was with offered to take me to meet him I accepted without hesitation. Maybe I thought that they were playing a joke, or that a miracle might be possible. But probably I just wasn't thinking, or had misunderstood the invitation. In any case, we came to a seven-story building with a façade painted a faded yellow and a bar on the ground floor, a bar of considerable dimensions, with a long counter and several booths, and my friends (although it seems odd to describe them that way; let's just say the enthusiasts who had offered to take me to meet the poet) led me to a booth, and there was Lihn. At first, I could hardly recognize him, it wasn't the face I had seen on his books; he'd grown thinner and younger, he'd become handsomer, and his eyes looked much brighter than the black-and-white eyes in the jacket photographs. In fact, Lihn didn't look like Lihn at all; he looked like a Hollywood actor, a B-list actor, the kind who stars in TV movies or films that are never shown in European cinemas and go straight to video. But at the same time he was Lihn; I was in no doubt about that. The enthusiasts greeted him, calling him Enrique with a fake-sounding familiarity, and asked him questions I couldn't understand, and then they introduced us, although to tell the truth I didn't need to be introduced, because for a time, a short time, I had corresponded with him, and his letters had, in a way, kept me going; I'm talking about 1981 or 1982, when I was living like a recluse in a house outside Gerona, with no money and no prospect of ever having any, and literature was a vast minefield occupied by enemies, except for a few classic authors (just a few), and every day I had to walk through that minefield, where any false move could be fatal, with only the poems of Archilochus to guide me. It's like that for all young writers. There comes a time when you have no support, not even from friends, forget about mentors, and there's no one to give you a hand; publication, prizes, and grants are reserved for the others, the ones who said "Yes, sir," over and over, or those who praised the literary mandarins, a never-ending horde distinguished only by their aptitude for discipline and punishment—nothing escapes them and they forgive nothing. Anyway, as I was saying, all young writers feel this way at some point or other in their lives. But at the time I was twenty-eight years old and under no circumstances could I consider myself a young writer. I was adrift. I wasn't the typical Latin-American writer living in Europe thanks to some government sinecure. I was a nobody and not inclined to beg for mercy or to show it. Then I started corresponding with Enrique Lihn. Naturally, I was the one who initiated the correspondence. I didn't have to wait long for his reply. A long, crotchety letter, as we might say in Chile: gloomy and irritable. In my reply I told him about my life, my house in the country, on one of the hills outside Gerona, the medieval city in front of it, the countryside or the void behind. I also told him about my dog, Laika, and said that in my opinion Chilean literature, with one or two exceptions, was shit. It was evident from his next letter that we were already friends. What followed was what typically happens when a famous poet befriends an unknown. He read my poems and included some of them in a kind of reading he organized to present the work of the younger generation at a Chilean-North

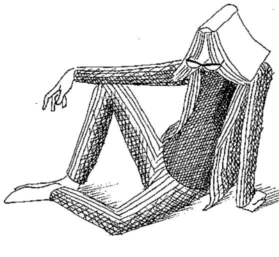




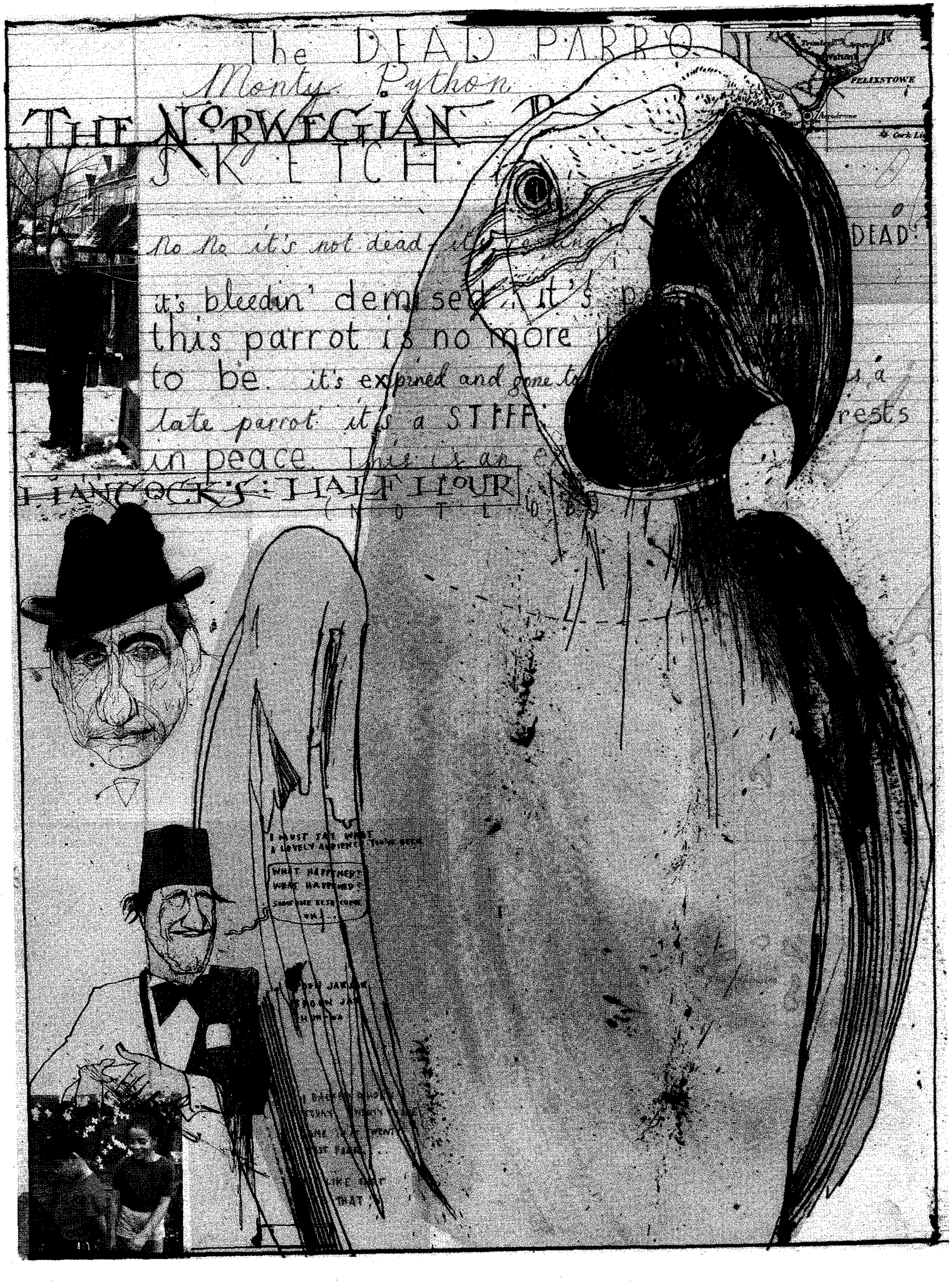
JOSEPH CLAYTON MILLS

DAVID BLAINE, AGE 60
ONE WEEKEND ON A LUMPY GUEST COT
GREGORY

American institute. In his letter he identified a group of hopefuls destined, so he thought, to be the six tigers of Chilean poetry in the year 2000. The six tigers were Bertoni, Maquieira, Gonzalo Muñoz, Martínez, Rodrigo Lira, and myself. I think. Maybe there were seven tigers. But I think there were only six. It would have been hard for the six of us to be anything much in 2000, because by then Rodrigo Lira, the best of the lot, had killed himself, and what was left of him had either been rotting for years in some cemetery or was ash, blowing around the streets and mingling with the filth of Santiago. Cats would have been more appropriate than tigers. Bertoni, as far as I know, is a kind of hippie who lives by the sea collecting shells and seaweed. Maquieira wrote a careful study of Cardenal and Coronel Urtecho's anthology of North American poetry, published two books, and then settled down to drinking. Gonzalo Muñoz went to Mexico, I heard, where he disappeared, not into ethylic oblivion, like Lowry's consul, but into the advertising industry. Martínez did a critical analysis of "Duchamp du Signe" and then died. As for Rodrigo Lira, well, I already explained what had become of him. Not so much tigers as cats, however you want to look at it. The kittens of a far-flung province. Anyway, what I wanted to say is that I knew Lihn, so no introduction was necessary. Nevertheless, the enthusiasts proceeded to introduce me, and neither I nor Lihn objected. So there we were, in a booth, and voices were saying, This is Roberto Bolaño, and I held out my hand, my arm enveloped by the darkness of the booth, and I grasped Lihn's hand, a slightly cold hand, which squeezed mine for a few seconds—the hand of a sad person, I thought, a hand and a handshake that corresponded perfectly to the face that was scrutinizing me without showing any sign of recognition. That correspondence was gestural, bodily, and opened onto an opaque eloquence that had nothing to say, or at least not to me. Once that moment was past, the enthusiasts started talking again and the silence receded; they were all asking Lihn for his opinions on the most disparate issues and events, and at that point my disdain for them evaporated, because I realized that they were just as I had once been: young poets with no support, kids who'd been shut out by the new center-left Chilean government and didn't have any backing or patronage, all they had was Lihn, a Lihn who looked not like the real Enrique Lihn as he appeared in his author photos but like a much handsomer and more prepossessing Lihn, a Lihn who resembled his poems, who had adopted their age, who lived in a building similar to his poems, and who could vanish in the elegant, resolute way that his poems sometimes had of vanishing. When I realized this, I remember, I felt better. I mean I began to make sense of the situation and find it amusing. I had nothing to fear: I was at home, with friends, with a writer I had always admired. It wasn't a horror movie. Or not an out-and-out horror movie, but a horror movie leavened with large doses of black humor. And just as I thought of black humor Lihn extracted a little bottle of pills from his pocket. I have to take one every three hours, he said. The enthusiasts fell silent once again. A waiter brought a glass of water. The pill was big. That's what I thought when I saw it fall into the glass of water. But in fact it wasn't big. It was dense. Lihn began to break it up with a spoon, and I realized that the pill looked like an onion with countless layers. I leaned forward and peered into the glass. For a moment I was quite sure that it was an infinite pill. The curved glass had a magnifying effect, like a lens: inside, the pale-pink pill was disintegrating as if giving birth to a galaxy or the universe. But galaxies are born or die (I forget which) suddenly, and what I could see through the curved side of that glass was unfolding in slow motion, each incomprehensible stage, every retraction and shudder drawn out as I watched. Then, feeling exhausted, I sat back, and my gaze, detached from the medicine, rose to meet Lihn's, which seemed to be saying, No comment, it's bad enough having to swallow this concoction every three hours, don't go looking for symbolic meanings—the water, the onion, the slow march of the stars. The enthusiasts had moved away from our table. Some were at the bar. I couldn't see the others. But when I looked at Lihn again there was an enthusiast with him, whispering something in his ear before leaving the booth to find his friends, who were scattered around the room. And at that moment I knew that Lihn knew he was dead. My heart's given up on me, he said. It doesn't exist anymore. Something's not right here, I thought. Lihn died of cancer, not a heart attack. An enormous heaviness was coming over me. So I got up and went to stretch my legs, but not in the bar; I went out into the street. The sidewalks were gray and uneven, and the sky looked like a mirror without a tain, the place where everything should have been reflected but where, in the end, nothing was. Nevertheless, a feeling of normality prevailed and pervaded all vision. When I felt I'd had enough fresh air and it was time to get back to the bar, I climbed the steps up to the door (stone steps, single blocks of a stone that had a granitelike consistency and the sheen of a gem) and ran into a guy who was shorter than me and dressed like a fifties gangster, a guy who had something of the caricature about him, the classic affable killer, who got me mixed up with someone he knew and greeted me. I replied to his greeting, although from the start I was sure that I didn't know him and that he was mistaken, but I behaved as if I knew him, as if I, too, had mixed him up with someone else, so the two of us greeted each other as we attempted ineffectively to climb those shining (yet deeply humble) stone steps. But the hit man's confusion lasted no more than a few seconds, he soon realized that he was mistaken, and then he looked at me in a different way, as if he were asking himself if I was mistaken, too, or if, on the contrary, I had been having him on from the start, and since he was thick and suspicious (though sharp in his own paradoxical way), he asked me who I was, he asked me with a malicious smile on his lips, and I said, Shit, Jara, it's me, Bolaño, and it would have been clear to anyone from his smile that he wasn't Jara, but he played the game, as if suddenly, struck by a lightning bolt (and no, I'm not quoting one of Lihn's poems, much less one of mine), he fancied the idea of living the life of that unknown Jara for a minute or two, the Jara he would never be, except right there, stalled at the top of those radiant steps, and he asked me about my life, he asked me (thick as a plank) who I was, admitting de facto that he was Jara, but a Jara who had forgotten the very existence of Bolaño, which is perfectly understandable, after all, so I explained to him who I was and, while I was at it, who he was, too, thereby creating a Jara to suit me and him, that is, to suit that moment—an improbable, intelligent, courageous, rich, generous, daring Jara, in love with a beautiful woman and loved by her in return—and then the gangster smiled, more and more deeply convinced that I was having him on but unable to bring the episode to a close, as if he had suddenly fallen for the image I was constructing for him, and encouraged me to go on telling him not just about Jara but also about Jara's friends and finally the world, a world that seemed too wide even for Jara, a world in which the great Jara was an ant whose death on a shining stair would not have mattered at all to anyone, and then, at last, his friends appeared, two taller hit men wearing light-colored double-breasted suits, who looked at me and at the false Jara as if to ask him who I was, and he had no choice but to say, It's Bolaño, and the two hit men greeted me. I shook their hands (rings, expensive watches, gold bracelets), and when they invited me to have a drink with them I said, I can't, I'm with a friend, and pushed past Jara through the door and disappeared inside. Lihn was still in the booth. But now there were no enthusiasts to be seen in his vicinity. The glass was empty. He had taken the medicine and was waiting. Without saying a word, we went up to his apartment. He lived on the seventh floor, and we took the elevator, a very large elevator, into which more than thirty people could have fit. His apartment was rather small, especially for a Chilean writer, and there were no books. To a question from me he replied that he hardly needed to read anymore. But there are always books, he added. You could see the bar from his apartment. As if the floor were made of glass. I spent a while on my knees, watching the people down there, looking for the enthusiasts, or the three gangsters, but I could see only unfamiliar people, eating or drinking, but mostly moving from one table or booth to another, or up and down the bar, all seized by a feverish excitement, as if in a novel from the first half of the twentieth century. After a while, I reached the conclusion that something was wrong. If the floor of Lihn's apartment was glass and so was the ceiling of the bar, what about all the stories from the second to the sixth? Were they made of glass, too? Then I looked down again and realized that between the first floor and the seventh floor there was nothing but empty space. This discovery distressed me. Jesus, Lihn, where have you brought me, I thought, though soon I was thinking, Jesus, Lihn, where have they brought you? I got to my feet carefully, because I knew that in that place, as opposed to the normal world, objects were more fragile than people, and I went looking for Lihn, who had disappeared, in the various rooms of the apartment, which didn't seem small anymore, like a European writer's apartment, but spacious, enormous, like a writer's apartment in Chile, in the Third World, with cheap domestic help and expensive, delicate objects, an apartment full of shifting shadows and rooms in semi-darkness, in which I found two books, one a classic, like a smooth stone, the other modern, timeless, like shit, and gradually, as I looked for Lihn, I, too, began to grow cold, increasingly manic and cold. I started feeling ill, as if the apartment were turning on an imaginary axis, but then a door opened and I saw a swimming pool, and there was Lihn, swimming, and before I could open my mouth and say something about entropy Lihn said that the bad thing about his medicine, the medicine he was taking to keep him alive, was that in a way it was turning him into a guinea pig for the drug company, words that I had somehow expected to hear, as if the whole thing were a play and I had suddenly remembered my lines and the lines of my fellow-actors, and then Lihn got out of the swimming pool and we went down to the ground floor, and we made our way through the crowded bar, and Lihn said, The tigers are finished, and, It was sweet while it lasted, and, You're not going to believe this, Bolaño, but in this neighborhood only the dead go out for a walk. And by then we had reached the front of the bar and were standing at a window, looking out at the streets and the façades of the buildings in that peculiar neighborhood where the only people walking around were dead. And we looked and looked, and the façades were clearly the façades of another time, like the sidewalks covered with parked cars that also belonged to another time, a time that was silent yet mobile (Lihn was watching it move), a terrible time that endured for no reason other than sheer inertia. ♦



(*Translated, from the Spanish, by Chris Andrews.*)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HANCOCK'S HALF HOUR
FELIXSTOWE
I MUST SAY WHAT A LOVELY AUDIENCE YOU'VE BEEN
WHAT HAPPENED? WHAT HAPPENED? SOMEONE ELSE COME ON...
LIKE THAT
THAT

We knew the "Dead Parrot" sketch by heart. We had the usual religious feeling for "Monty Python's Life of Brian."

PERSONAL HISTORY

DEAD MAN LAUGHING

Jokes run through a family.

BY ZADIE SMITH

My father had few enthusiasms, but he loved comedy. He was a comedy nerd, though this is so common a condition in Britain as to be almost not worth mentioning. Like most Britons, Harvey gathered his family around the defunct hearth each night to watch the same half-hour comic situations repeatedly, in reruns and on video. We knew the "Dead Parrot" sketch by heart. We had the usual religious feeling for "Monty Python's Life of Brian." If we were notable in any way, it was not in kind but in extent. In our wood-cabinet music center, comedy records outnumbered the Beatles. The Goons' "I'm Walking Backward for Christmas" got an airing all year long. We liked to think of ourselves as particular, on guard against slapstick's easy laughs—Benny Hill was beneath our collective consideration. I suppose the more precise term is "comedy snobs."

Left unchecked, comedy snobbery can squeeze the joy out of the enterprise. You end up thinking of comedy as Hemingway thought of narrative: structured like an iceberg, with all the greater satisfactions fathoms under water, while the surface pleasure of the joke is somehow the least of it. In my father, this tendency was especially pronounced. He objected to joke merchants. He was wary of the revue-style bonhomie of the popular TV double act Morecambe and Wise, and disapproved of the cheery bawdiness of their rivals, the Two Ronnies. He was allergic to racial and sexual humor, to a far greater degree than any of the actual black people or women in his immediate family. Harvey's idea of a good time was the BBC sitcom "Steptoe and Son," the grim tale of two mutually antagonistic "rag-and-bone men" who pass their days in a Beckettian pile of rubbish, tearing psychological strips off each other. Each episode ends with the son (a philosopher manqué, who considers himself trapped in the filthy family business) submitting to a funk of existential despair. The sadder and more desolate the comedy, the better Harvey liked it.

DAVID HUGHES

His favorite was Tony Hancock, a comic wedded to despair, in his life as much as in his work. (Hancock died of an overdose in 1968.) Harvey had him on vinyl: a pristine, twenty-year-old set of LPs. The series was "Hancock's Half Hour," a situation comedy in which Hancock plays a broad version of himself and, to my mind, of my father. A quintessentially English, poorly educated, working-class war veteran with social and intellectual aspirations, whose fictional address—23 Railway Cuttings, East Cheam—perfectly conjures the aspirant bleakness of London's suburbs (as if Cheam were significant enough a spot to have an East.) Harvey, meanwhile, could be found in 24 Athelstan Gardens, Willesden Green (a poky housing estate named after the ancient king of England), also by a railway. Hancock's heartbreaking inability to pass as a middle-class beatnik or otherwise pull himself out of the hole he was born in was a source of great mirth to Harvey, despite the fact that this was precisely his own situation. He loved Hancock's hopefulness, and loved the way he was always disappointed. He passed this love on to his children, with the result that we inherited the comic tastes of a previous generation. (Born in 1925, Harvey was old enough to be our grandfather.) Occasionally, I'd lure friends to my room and make them listen to "The Blood Donor" or "The Radio Ham." This never went well. I demanded complete silence, was in the habit of lifting the stylus and replaying a section if any incidental noise should muffle a line, and generally leached all potential pleasure from the exercise with laborious explanations of the humor and said humor's possible obfuscation by period details: ration books, shillings and farthings, coins for the meter, and so on. It was a hard sell in the brave new comedic world of "The Jerk" and "Beverly Hills Cop" and "Ghostbusters."

Hancock wasn't such an anachronism, as it turns out. Genealogically speaking, Harvey had his finger on the pulse of British comedy, for Hancock begot Basil Fawlty, and Fawlty begot Alan Partridge, and Partridge begot the immortal David Brent. And Hancock and his descendants served as a constant source of conversation between my father and me, a vital link between us when, class-wise, and in every other wise, each year placed us farther apart. As in many British families, it was university wot dunnit. When I returned home from my first term at Cambridge, we couldn't discuss the things I'd learned, about Anna Karenina, or G. E. Moore, or Gawain and his staggeringly boring Green Knight, because Harvey had never learned them—but we could always speak of Basil. It was a conversation that lasted decades, well beyond the twelve episodes in which Basil himself is contained. The episodes were merely jumping-off points; we carried on compulsively creating Basil long after his authors had stopped. Great situation comedy expands in the imagination. For my generation, never having seen David Brent's apartment in "The Office" is no obstacle to conjuring up his interior decoration: the risqué Athena poster, the gigantic entertainment system, the comical fridge magnets. Similarly, for my father, imagining Basil Fawlty's school career was a creative exercise. "He would have failed his eleven-plus," Harvey once explained to me. "And that would've been the start of the trouble." When meditating on the sitcom, you extrapolate from the details, which in Britain are almost always signifiers of social class: Hancock's battered homburg, Fawlty's cravat, Partridge's driving gloves, Brent's fake Italian suits. It's a relief to be able to laugh at these things. In British comedy, the painful class dividers of real life are neutralized and exposed. In my family, at least, it was a way of talking about things we didn't want to talk about.

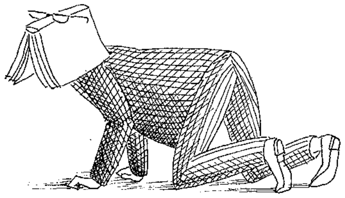
When Harvey was very ill, in the autumn of 2006, I went to visit him at a nursing home in the seaside town of Felixstowe, armed with the DVD boxed set of "Fawlty Towers." By this point, he was long divorced from my mother, his second divorce, and was living alone on the gray East Anglian coast, far from his children. A dialysis patient for a decade (he lost his first kidney to stones, the second to cancer), his body now began to give up. I had meant to leave the DVDs with him, something for the empty hours alone, but when I got there, with nothing to talk about, we ended up watching them together for the umpteenth time, he on the single chair, me on the floor, cramped in that grim little nursing-home bedroom, surely the least funny place he'd ever found himself in—with the possible exception of the 1944 Normandy landings. We watched several episodes, back to back. We laughed. Never more than when Basil thrashed an Austin 1100 with the branch of a tree, an act of inspired pointlessness that seemed analogous to our own situation. And then we watched the DVD extras, in which we found an illuminating little depth charge hidden among the nostalgia and the bloopers:

> It was probably—may have been—my idea that she should be a bit less posh than him, because we couldn't see otherwise what would have attracted them to each other. I have a sort of vision of her family being in catering on the south coast, you know, and her working behind a bar somewhere, he being demobbed from his national service and getting his gratuity, you know, and going in for a drink and this . . . barmaid behind the bar and she fancied him because he was so posh. And they sort of thought they'd get married and run a hotel together and it was all a bit sort of romantic and idealistic, and the grim reality then caught up with them.

That is the actress Prunella Scales answering a question of comic (and class) motivation that had troubled my father for twenty years: why on earth did they marry each other? A question that—given his own late, failed marriage to a Jamaican girl less than half his age—must have had a resonance beyond the laugh track. On finally hearing an answer, he gave a sigh of comedy-snob satisfaction. Not long after my visit, Harvey died, at the age of eighty-one. He had told me that he wanted "It's All Over Now, Baby Blue" played at his funeral. When the day came, I managed to remember that. I forgot which version, though (sweet, melodic Baez). What he got instead was jeering, post-breakup Dylan, which made it seem as if my mild-mannered father had gathered his friends and family with the particular aim of telling them all to fuck off from beyond the grave. As comedy, this would have raised a half smile out of Harvey, not much more. It was a little broad for his tastes.

In birth, two people go into a room and three come out. In death, one person goes in and none come out. This is a cosmic joke told by Martin Amis. I like the metaphysical absurdity it draws out of the death event, the sense that death doesn't happen at all—that it is, in fact, the opposite of a happening. There are philosophers who take this joke seriously. To their way of thinking, the only option in the face of death—in facing death's absurd non-face—is to laugh. This is not the bold, humorless laugh of the triumphant atheist, who conquers what he calls death and his own fear of it. No: this is more unhinged. It comes from the powerless, despairing realization that death cannot be conquered, defied, contemplated, or even approached, because it's not there; it's only a word, signifying nothing. It's a truly funny laugh, of the laugh-or-you'll-cry variety. There is "plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us!" This is a cosmic joke told by Franz Kafka, a wisecrack projected into a void. When I first put the partial cremains of my father in a Tupperware sandwich box and placed it on my writing desk, that was the joke I felt like telling.

Conversely, the death we speak of and deal with every day, the death that is full of meaning, the non-absurd death, this is a place-marker, a fake, a convenient substitute. It was this sort of death that I was determined to press upon my father, as he did his dying. In my version, Harvey was dying meaningfully, in linear fashion, within a scenario stage-managed and scripted by the people around him. Neatly crafted, like an American sitcom: "The One in Which My Father Dies." It was to conclude with a real event called Death, which he would *experience* and for which he would be ready. I did all the usual, banal things. I brought a Dictaphone to his bedside, in order to collect the narrative of his life (this perplexed him—he couldn't see the through line). I grew furious with overworked nurses. I refused to countenance any morbidity from my father, or any despair. The funniest thing about dying is how much we, the living, ask of the dying; how we beg them to make it easy on us. At the hospital, I ingratiated myself with the doctors and threw what the British call "new money" at the situation. Harvey watched me go about my business with a puzzled half smile. To all my eager suggestions he said, "Yes, dear—if you like," for he knew well that we were dealing with the National Health Service, into which all Smiths are born and die, and my new money would mean only that exactly the same staff, in the same hospital, would administer the same treatments, though in a slightly nicer room, with a window and possibly a television. He left me to my own devices, sensing that these things made a difference to me, though they made none to him: "Yes, dear—if you like." I was still thrashing an Austin 1100 with a tree branch; he was some way beyond that. And then, when he was truly beyond it, far out on the other side of nowhere, a nurse offered me the opportunity to see the body, which I refused. That was a mistake. It left me suspended in a bad joke in which a living man inexplicably becomes two pints of dust and everyone acts as if this were not a joke at all but, rather, the most reasonable thing in the world. A body would have been usefully, concretely absurd. I would have known—or so people say—that the thing lying there on the slab wasn't my father. As it was, I missed the death, I missed the body, I got the dust, and from these facts I tried to extrapolate a story, as writers will, but found myself, instead, in a kind of stasis. A moment in which nothing hap-



pened, and keeps not happening, forever. Later, I was informed, by way of comfort, that Harvey had also missed his death: he was in the middle of a sentence, joking with his nurse. "He didn't even know what hit him!" the head matron said, which was funny, too, because who the hell does?

Proximity to death inspired the manic spirit of carpe diem in the Smiths. After Harvey died, my mother met a younger man in Africa and married him. The younger of my two brothers, Luke, went to Atlanta to pursue dreams of rap stardom. Both decisions sounded like promising pilot episodes for new sitcoms. And then I tried to ring in the changes, by moving to Italy. In my empty kitchen, on the eve of leaving the country, I put my finger in the dust of my father and put the dust into my mouth and swallowed it, and there was something very funny about that—I laughed as I did it. After that, it felt as if I didn't laugh again for a long time. Or do much of anything. Imagined worlds moved quite out of my reach, seemed utterly pointless, not to mention a colossal human presumption: "Yes, dear—if you like." For two years in Rome, I looked from blank computer screen to handful of dust and back again—a scenario that no one, even in Britain, could turn into a sitcom. Then, as I was preparing to leave Italy, Ben, my other brother, rang with his news. He wanted me to know that he had broken with our longstanding family tradition of passive comedy appreciation. He had decided to become a comedian.

TAKE THE NEXT RIGHT.
P.C.VEY

"Why didn't you spring for a proper G.P.S.?"

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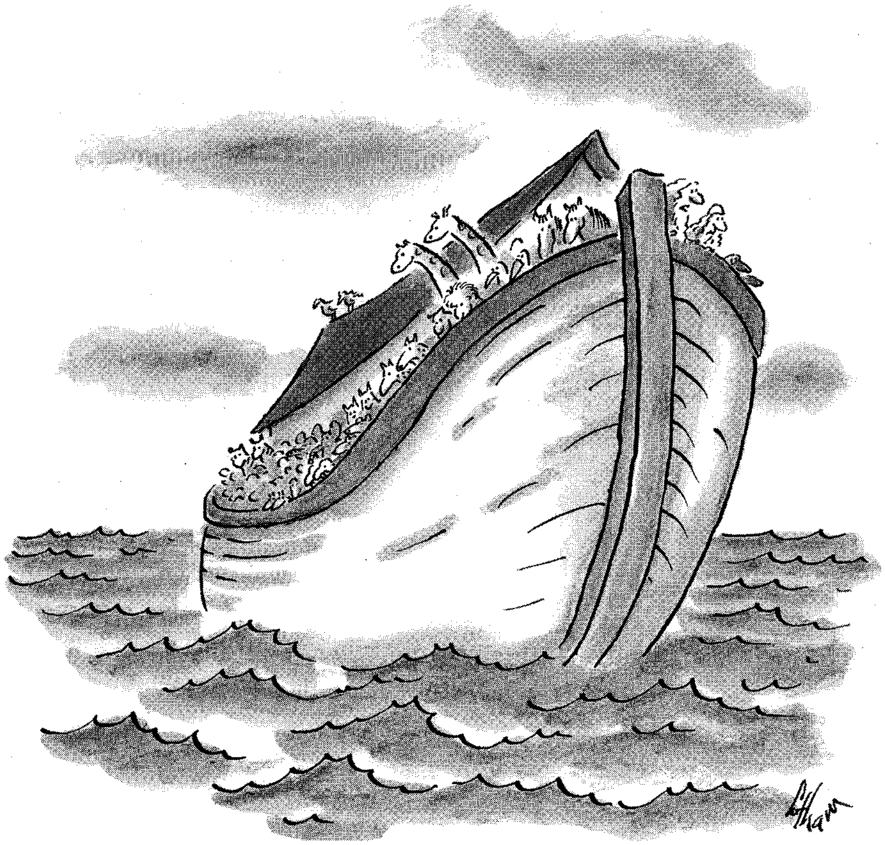
It turns out that becoming a comedian is an act of instantaneous self-creation. There are no intermediaries blocking your way, no gallerists, publishers, or distributors. Social class is a non-issue; you do not have to pass your eleven-plus. In a sense, it would have been a good career for our father, a creative man whose frequent attempts at advancement were forever thwarted, or so he felt, by his accent and his background, his lack of education, connections, luck. Of course, Harvey wasn't, in himself, *funny*—but you don't always have to be. In the world of comedy, if you are absolutely determined to stand on a stage for five minutes with a mike in your hand, someone in London will let you do it, if only once. Ben was determined: he'd given up the after-school youth group he had, till then, managed; he'd written material; he had tickets for me, my mother, my aunt. It was my private opinion that he'd had a minor nervous breakdown of some kind, a delayed reaction to his bereavement. I acted pleased, bought a plane ticket, flew over. We had been tight as thieves as children, but I'd barely seen him since Harvey died, and I sensed us settling into the attenuated relations of adult siblings, a new formal distance, always slightly abashed, for there seems no clear way, in adult life, to do justice to the intimacy of childhood. I remember being scandalized, as a child, at how rarely our parents spoke to *their* siblings. How was it possible? How did it happen? Then it happens to you. Thinking of him standing up there alone with a microphone, though, trying to be *funny*, I felt a renewed, Siamese-twin closeness: fearing for him was like fearing for me. I've never been able to bear watching anyone die onstage, never mind a blood relative. If he'd told me that it was major heart surgery he was about to have, on this makeshift stage in the tiny, dark basement of a London pub, I couldn't have been more sick about it.

It was a mixed bill. Before Ben, two men and two women performed a mildewed sketch show of unmistakable Oxbridge vintage, circa 1994. A certain brittle poshness informed their exaggerated portraits of high-strung secretaries, neurotic piano teachers, absent-minded professors. They put on mustaches and wigs and walked in and out of imaginary scenarios where fewer and fewer funny things occurred. It was the comedy of things past. The girls, though dressed as girls, were no longer girls, and the boys had paunches and bald spots; the faintest trace of ancient intracomedy-troupe love affairs clung to them sadly; all the promising meetings with the BBC had come and gone. This was being done out of pure friendship now, or the memory of friendship. As I watched the unspooling horror of it, a repressed, traumatic memory resurfaced, of an audition, one that must have taken place around the time this comedy troupe was formed, very likely in the same town. This audition took the form of a breakfast meeting, a "chat about comedy" with two young men, then members of the Cambridge Footlights, now a popular British TV double act. I don't remember what it was that I said. I remember only strained smiles, the silent consumption of scrambled eggs, a feeling of human free fall. And the conclusion, which was obvious to us all. Despite having spent years at the grindstone of comedy appreciation, I wasn't funny. Not even slightly.

And now the compère was calling my brother's name. He stepped out. I felt a great wash of East Anglian fatalism, my father's trademark, pass over to me, its new custodian. Ben was dressed in his usual urban streetwear, the only black man in the room. I began peeling the label off my beer bottle. I sensed at once the way he was going to play it, the same way we had played it throughout our childhood—a few degrees off whatever it was that people expected of us, when they looked at us. This evening, that strategy took the form of an opening song about the Olympics, with particular attention paid to equestrian dressage. It was funny! He was getting laughs. He pushed steadily forward, a slow, gloomy delivery that owed something to Harvey's seemingly infinite pessimism. *No good can come of this.* This had been Harvey's reaction to all news, no matter how objectively good that news might be, from the historic entrance of a Smith child into an actual university to the birthing of babies and the winning of prizes. When he became ill, he took a perversely British satisfaction in the diagnosis of cancer: absolutely nothing good could come of this, and the certainty of it seemed almost to calm him.

I waited, like my father, for the slipup, the flat joke. It didn't come. Ben did a minute on hip-hop, a minute on his baby daughter, a minute on his freshly minted standup career. Another song. I was still laughing, and so was everyone else. Finally, I felt able to look up from the beer mats to the stage. Up there I saw my brother, who is not eight, as I forever expect him to be, but thirty, and who appeared completely relaxed, as if born with mike in hand. And then it was over—no one had died.

The next time I saw Ben do standup was about ten gigs later, at the 2008 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. He didn't exactly die the night I turned up, but he was badly wounded. It was a shock to him, because it was the first time. In comedy terms, his cherry got popped. At first, he couldn't see why: it was the same type of venue he'd been doing in London—intimate, drunken—and, by and large, it was the same material. Why, this time, were the laughs smaller? Why, for one good joke in particular, did they not occur at all? We repaired to the bar to regroup, with all the other comedians doing the same. In comedy, the analysis of death, or near-death, experiences is a clear, unsentimental process. The discussion is technical, closer to a musician's self-analysis than to a writer's: this note was off; you missed the beat there. I knew I could say to Ben, honestly, and without fear of hurting him, "It was the pause—you went too slowly on the punch line," and he could say, "Yep," and the next night the pause would be shortened, the punch line would hit its mark. We ordered more beer. "The thing I don't understand—I don't understand what happened with the new material. I thought it was good, but . . ." Another comedian, who was also ordering beer, chipped in, "Did you do it first?" "Yes." "Don't do the new stuff first. Do it last. Just because you're excited by it doesn't mean it should go first. It's not ready yet."



"We're going to have a post-flood economy to deal with."

We drank a lot, with a lot of very drunk comedians, until very late. Trying to keep up with the wisecracks and the complaints, I felt as if I'd arrived late to a battleground that had seen bloody action. The comedians had the aura of survivors, speaking the language of mutual, hard experience: venues too hot and too small, the horror of empty seats, who got nominated for what, who'd been reviewed well or badly, and, of course, the financial pain. (Some Edinburgh performers break even, most incur debts, and almost no one makes a profit.) It was strange to see my brother, previously a member of my family, becoming a member of *this* family, all his previous concerns and principles subsumed, like theirs, into one simple but demanding question: *Is it funny?* And that's another reason to envy comedians: when they look at a blank page, they always know, at least, the question they need to ask themselves. I think the clarity of their aim accounts for a striking phenomenon, peculiar to comedy: the possibility of extremely rapid improvement. Comedy is a Lazarus art; you can die onstage and then rise again. It's not unusual to see a mediocre young standup in January and, seeing him again in December, discover a comedian who's found his groove, a transformed artist, a death-defier.

Russell Kane, a relatively new British comic, is a death-defier, the sort of comedian who won't let a moment pass without filling it with laughter. I went to see him on the last night of his Edinburgh run. His show was called "Gaping Flaws," a phrase lifted from a negative online review of his 2007 Edinburgh show, which, in turn, was called "Easy Cliché and Tired Stereotype," a phrase lifted from a negative review of his début 2006 show, "Russell Kane's Theory of Pretension." All these reviews came from the same man, Steve Bennett, a prominent British comedy critic who writes for the Web site Chortle.The problem with Kane was class—the British problem. A self-defined working-class "Essex boy" (though, physically, his look is more indie Americana than English suburbia; he's a dead ringer for the singer Anthony Kiedis), he centers his act on the tricky business of being the alien in the family, the wannabe intellectual son of a working-class, bigoted father. To his father, Kane's passion for reading is deeply suspicious, his interest in the arts tantamount to an admission of sexual deviancy. Kane's dilemma has a natural flip side, a typically British ressentiment for those very people his sensibilities have moved him toward. The middle classes, the Guardianistas (readers of the left-leaning liberal newspaper the *Guardian*), the smug élites who have made him feel his class in the first place. *Can't go home, can't leave home:* a subject close to my heart.

In 2006, Kane played this material too broadly, overexploiting a natural gift for grotesque physical comedy: his father was a hulking deformed monster, the Guardianistas fey fools, skipping across the stage. In 2007, the chip on his shoulder was still there, but the ideas were better, the portraits more detailed, more refined; he began to find his balance, which is a rare mixture of inspired verbal sparring and effective physical comedy. Third time's the charm: "Gaping Flaws" had almost none. It was still all about class, but some magical integration had occurred. I couldn't help being struck by the sense that what it might take a novelist a lifetime to achieve, a bright comedian can resolve in three seasons. (How to present a working-class experience to the middle classes without diluting it. How to stay angry without letting anger distort your work. How to be funny about the most serious things.)

Audiences love death-defiers like Kane. It's what they pay their money for, after all: laughs per minute. They tend to be less fond of those comedians who have themselves tired of the non-stop laughter and pine for a little silence. I want to call it "comedy nausea." Comedy nausea is the extreme incarnation of what my father felt: not only is joke-telling a cheap art; *the whole business of standup* is, in some sense, a shameful cheat. For a comedian of this kind, I imagine it feels like a love affair gone wrong. You start out wanting people to laugh in exactly the places you mean them to laugh, then they *always* laugh where you want them to laugh—then you start to hate them for it. Sometimes the feeling is temporary. The comedian returns to standup and finds new joy in, and respect for, the art of death-defying. Sometimes, as with Peter Cook (voted, by his fellow-comedians, in a British poll, the greatest comedian of all time), comedy nausea turns terminal, and only the most difficult laugh in the world will satisfy. Toward the end of his life, when his professional comedy output was practically nil, Cook made a series of phone calls to a radio call-in show, using the pseudonym Sven from Swiss Cottage (an area of northwest London), during which he discussed melancholy Norwegian matters in a thick Norwegian accent, arguably the funniest and bleakest "work" he ever did.

At the extreme end of this sensibility lies the anti-comedian. An anti-comedian not only allows death onstage; he invites death up. Andy Kaufman was an anti-comedian. So was Lenny Bruce. Tommy Cooper is the great British example. His comedy persona was "inept magician." He did intentionally bad magic tricks and told surreal jokes that played like Zen koans. He *actually* died onstage, collapsing from a heart attack during a 1984 live TV broadcast. I was nine, watching it on telly with Harvey. When Cooper fell over, we laughed and laughed, along with the rest of Britain, realizing only when the show cut to the commercial break that he wasn't kidding.

There was an anti-comedian at Edinburgh this year. His name was Edward Aczel. You will not have heard of him—neither had I, neither has practically anyone. This was only his second Edinburgh appearance. Maybe it was the fortuitous meeting of my mournful mood and his morbid material, but I thought his show, "Do I Really Have to Communicate with You?," was one of the strangest, and finest, hours of live comedy I'd ever seen. It started with neither a bang nor a whimper. It didn't really start. We, the audience, sat in nervous silence in a tiny dark room, and waited. Some fumbling with a cassette recorder was heard, faint music, someone mumbling backstage: "Welcome to the stage . . . Edward Aczel." Said without enthusiasm. A man wandered out. Going bald, early forties, schlubby, entirely nondescript. He said, "All right?" in a hopeless sort of way, and then decided that he wanted to do the introduction again. He went offstage and came on again. He did this several times. Despair settled over the room. Finally, he fixed himself in front of the microphone. "I think you'll all recall," he muttered, barely audible, "the words of Wittgenstein, the great twentieth-century philosopher, who said, 'If indeed mankind came to earth for a specific reason, it certainly wasn't to enjoy ourselves.' " A long, almost unbearable pause. "If you could bear that in mind while I'm on, I'd certainly appreciate it." Then, on a large flip chart, the kind of thing an account manager in an Aylesbury marketing agency might swipe from his office (Aczel is, in real life, an account manager for an Aylesbury marketing agency), he began to write with a Magic Marker. It was a list of what not to expect from his show. He went through it with us. There was to be:

> No nudity.
> No juggling.
> No impressions of any well-known people.
> No reference to crop circles during the show.
> No one will be conceived during the show.
> No tackling head-on of any controversial issues. . . .
> And finally, and I think most importantly—
> No refunds.

I recognized my father's spirit in this list: *No good can come of this.* He then told us that he had a box of jigsaw puzzles backstage, for anyone who became dangerously bored. Later, he drew a graph made up of an x-axis, which stood for "TIME," and a y-axis, for "GOODWILL," on which he tracked the show's progress. Point one, low down: "*Let's all go and get a drink—this is pointless.*" Point two, slightly higher up: "*O.K., carry on, whatever.*" Point three, still only halfway up: "*We could all be here forever. We think this is great.*" He looked at his shoes, then, with mild aggression, at the audience. "We'll never get to that point," he said. "It's just . . . it'll never happen." By this time, everyone was laughing, but the laughter was a little crazy, disjointed. It's a reckless thing, for a comedian, to be this honest with an audience. To say, in effect, "Whatever I do, whatever you do, we're *all* going to die." When it finally came to jokes ("Now we go into the section of the show routinely called 'material,' for obvious reasons"), Aczel had a dozen written on his hand, and they were very funny, but by now he had already convinced us that jokes were the least of what could be done here. It was an easy and wonderful thing to believe this show a genuine shambles, saved only by our attention and by chance. (We were mistaken, of course. Every stumble, every murmur, is identical, every night.) In the lobby afterward, calendars were on sale, each month illustrated by impossibly banal photographs of Aczel in bed, washing his face, walking into work, standing in the road. Mine sits on my desk, next to my father in his Tupperware sandwich box. On the cover, Aczel is pictured in a supermarket aisle. The subtitle reads, "Life is endless, until you die"—Edith Piaf. Each month has a message for me. November: "Winter is coming—Yes!" April: "Who cares." June: "This is not the life I was promised." *There is plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us!*

On the last night of the Edinburgh festival, in another small, dark, drunken venue, I waited for my brother to go on. It was about two in the morning. Only comedians were left at the festival; the audiences had all gone home. I feared for him, again—but he did his set, and he killed. He was relaxed. There was nothing riding on his performance; the pause had been fixed. Then a young Australian dude came on and spoke a lot about bottle openers, and he killed, too. Maybe everybody kills at two in the morning. Then the end of the end: one last comedian took the bar stage. This was Andy Zaltzman, a great, tall man with an electrified Einstein hairdo and a cutting, political-satirical act that got its laughs per minute. He set to work, confident, funny, and instantly got heckled, a heckle that was followed by a collective audience intake of breath, for the heckler was Daniel Kitson, a rather shy, whimsical young comedian from Yorkshire who looks like a beardy cross between a fisherman and a geography teacher. Kitson won the Perrier Comedy Award in 2002, at the age of twenty-five, and his gift is for the crafting of exquisite narratives, shows shaped like Alice Munro stories, bathetic and beautiful. A comedy-snob thrill passed through the room. It was a bit like Nick Drake turning up at a James Taylor gig. Kitson good-humoredly heckled Zaltzman, and Zaltzman heckled back. Their ideas went spiralling down nonsensical paths, collided, did battle, and separated. Kitson busied himself handing out flyers for "Our joint show, tomorrow!," a show that couldn't exist, because the festival was over. We all took one. Zaltzman and Kitson got loose; the jokes were everywhere, with everyone, the whole room becoming comedy. There was a kind of hysteria abroad. I looked over at my brother and could see that he'd got this abdominal pain, too, and we were both doubled over, crying, and I wished Harvey were there, and at the same moment I felt something come free in me.

I have to confess to an earlier comic embellishment: my father is no longer in a Tupperware sandwich box. He was, for a year, but then I bought a pretty Italian Art Deco vase for him, completely see-through, so I can see through to him. The vase is posh, and not funny like the sandwich box, but I decided that what Harvey didn't have much of in life he would get in death. In life, he found Britain hard. It was a nation divided by postcodes and accents, schools and last names. The humor of its people helped make it bearable. *You don't have to be funny to live here, but it helps.* Hancock, Fawlty, Partridge, Brent: in my mind, they're all clinging to the middle rungs of England's class ladder. That, in large part, is the comedy of their situations.

For eighty-one years, my father was up to the same game, though his situation wasn't so comical; at least, the living of it wasn't. *Listen, I'll tell you a joke:* his mother had been in service, his father worked on the buses; he passed the grammar-school exam, but the cost of the uniform for the secondary school was outside the family's budget. *No, wait, it gets better:* At thirteen, he left school to fill the inkwells in a lawyer's office, to set the fire in the grate. At seventeen, he went to fight in the Second World War. In the fifties, he got married, started a family, and, finding that he had a good eye, tried commercial photography. His pictures were good, he set up a little studio, but then his business partner stiffed him in some dark plot of which he would never speak. His marriage ended. *And here's the kicker:* in the sixties, he had to start all over again, as a salesman. In the seventies, he married for the second time. A new lot of children arrived. The high point was the late eighties, a senior salesman now at a direct-mail company—selling paper, just like David Brent. Finally, the (lower) middle rung! A maisonette, half a garden, a sweet deal with a local piano teacher who taught Ben and me together, two bums squeezed onto the piano stool. But it didn't last, and the second marriage didn't last, and he ended up with little more than he had started with. Listening to my first novel, "White Teeth," on tape, and hearing the rough arc of his life in the character Archie Jones, he took it well, seeing the parallels but also the difference: "He had better luck than me!" The novel was billed as comic fiction. To Harvey, it sat firmly in the laugh-or-you'll-cry genre. And when that "Fawlty Towers" boxed set came back to me as my only inheritance (along with a cardigan, several atlases, and a photograph of Venice), I did a little of both. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

An audio interview with Zadie Smith.

GREETINGS, FRIENDS!

BY ROGER ANGELL

Fair readers, hail! Now here’s a teaser:
Who’s this pale, familiar geezer
Appearing through the mists of time
Atop a tow’r of creaky rhyme?
Why, yes, it’s us—we’re back, hooray,
To hug you each this holiday
And post sweet thoughts of you from here
To neighbors round the blogosphere.
Felicitations, dears and dudes,
Let’s see some Yuley attitudes—
Come bump the chest and dap a fist
With élite types upon our list
(Each of them in private thinking,
This could be my Christmas inking)
And wish them and their couplets well
On this retrieval of Noël.
Susan Choi! Jeremy Irons!
May joy accrue in your environs!
Let pleasant days descend, for cause,
Upon the Robert Morgenthaus,
And Christmas bliss, we should assume,
Enfold us each and Heidi Klum.
We wish a busy year-end hols
To Stephen Frears, the Pussycat Dolls,
Andrew Sarris, Sarah Vowell,
Paris Hilton, and Colin Powell.
C’mon, ’09, bring on the drama:
Welcome, Pres.-elect Obama!
Hail, Michelle! Historic faces!
Brains let loose in higher places!
Notwithstanding gloom and crisis,
Cool and thinking once or twice is
What we’ll need till things grow brighter—
Or so says your low-rent writer.
If no one minds, here’s where we hail
Our friends Chris Beels and Christian Bale,
And folks whose names you knew we’d know,
Like Suri Cruise and Wayne Thiebaud,
Bristol Palin, Dakota Fanning,
Lizzie Peyton, and Peyton Manning.
Carla Bruni, *comment ça va*?
Et Georges Cluny—*connais pas*?
So ha’r you doin’, George F. Will,
Drew Gilpin Faust, and Dr. Phil?
Yo, to speed this selfsame notion,
Usain Bolt and Andrew Motion.
Fetch lattes, Muse, to elevate
Ric Burns and Rocco Mediate;
And baby quiches, cheese or spinach,
For me and Dennis J. Kucinich.
We’ve mistletoe, in hope it helps
To waft good will to Michael Phelps,
And myrrh (spell-checked) to make the Day
For Charlie Crist and Tina Fey.
Come Christmas, gang, we’ll ask St. Nick
To not forget Nathaniel Fick;
Then drop requested toys and games
On Lolo Jones and LeBron James,
Plus lumps of coal from deepest pack
For Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac,
And candy canes enough to rain
Around the homes of John McCain.
Jump in here, waits, in makeshift choir
And lift some chords for Danny Meyer,
With gladsome tunes for Teri Garr,
Zaha Hadid, and David Carr;
And make the lofty welkin ring
O’er Miley Cyrus, Vijay Singh,
And lissome late selections then
For Esa-Pekka Salonen;
And, lads, ere you cease this yowling,
Alleluia, J. K. Rowling!
Foregathered round the verdant pine
With kith and kids of yours and mine,
We’ll sort out gifts with Maya Lin,
And call Al Gore and Christo in
To clink a glass with neighbors there,
Like Neal Medlyn and Sheila Bair.
We’ll plan a flowing New Year’s with
Alison Cool and Kiki Smith:
In gala gear, in party rags,
We’ll greet Snoop Dogg and Billy Wags,
And similars of known renown,
Like Mardy Fish and Foxy Brown.
By wintry lawn we’ll dance till dawn
With Sheryl Crow and Wally Shawn,
J. Lo, Mo (the doughty Yankee),
Beyoncé, and Ben Bernanke,
Bobby Jindal, Tilda Swinton,
Sergey Brin, and Chelsea Clinton!

We’ve reached home port, this year is done;
Let’s trade it for a milder one.
As prescription, in a kernel,
Put your trust in the diurnal:
The Dow ascends, albeit slightly;
Lou Dobbs sounds offended nightly;
Spring arrives, the Mets are better;
Feed the kitten, mail that letter.
Christmas again, for what it’s worth:
Godspeed, good friends, and peace on earth.

ARNIE LEVIN

THE GANGSTERS

BY COLSON WHITEHEAD

First, you had to settle the question of out. *When did you get out?* Asking this was like showing off, even though anyone you could ask had already received the same gift: the same sun wrapped in shiny paper, the same soft benevolent sky, the same gravel road that sooner or later would skin you, pure joy in the town of Sag Harbor. Still, it was hard not to believe that it all belonged to you more than to anyone else, that it had been made for you, had been waiting for years for you to come along. We all felt that way. We were so grateful just to be there, in the heat, after a long bleak year in the city. *When did you get out?*

In the summer of 1985, I was fifteen years old. My brother, Reggie, was fourteen. That year, we got out the second Saturday in June, in an hour and a half flat from the Upper West Side, having beat the traffic. Over the course of the summer, you heard a lot of different strategies for how to beat the traffic, or at least slap it around a little. There were those who ditched the office early on Friday afternoon, casually letting their co-workers know the reason for their departure, in order to enjoy a little low-pressure envy. Others headed back to the city late on Sunday evening, choking every last pulse of joy from the weekend with cocoa-buttered hands. They stopped to grab a bite and watched the slow red surge outside the restaurant window while dragging clam strips through tartar sauce—soon, soon, not yet—until the coast was clear. My father's method was easy and brutal: hit the road at five in the morning, so that we were the only living souls on the Long Island Expressway, making a break for it in the haunted dark. Well, it wasn't really dark—June sunrises are up and at 'em—but I always remember the drives that way, perhaps because my eyes were closed most of the time. The trick of those early-morning jaunts was to wake up just enough to haul a bag of clothes down to the car, nestle in, and then retreat back into sleep. My brother and I did a zombie march, slow and mute, to the back seat, where we turned into our separate nooks, sniffing the upholstery, butt to butt, looking more or less like a Rorschach test. What do you see in this picture? Two brothers going off in different directions.

We had recently ceased to be twins. We were born ten months apart, and until I started high school we had come as a matched set, more Siamese than identical, defined by our uncanny inseparability. Joined not at the hip or the spleen or the nervous system but at that most important place—that spot on your self where you meet the world. There was something in the human DNA that had compelled people to say "Benji 'n' Reggie, Benji 'n' Reggie" in a singsong way, as if we were cartoon characters. On the rare occasions when we'd been caught alone, the first thing people had asked was "Where's Benji?" or "Where's Reggie?," whereupon we'd delivered a thorough account of our other's whereabouts, quickly including context, as if embarrassed to be caught out in the sunlight with only half a shadow: "He rode into town. He lost his CAT Diesel Power cap at the beach and went to get a new one at the five-and-ten."

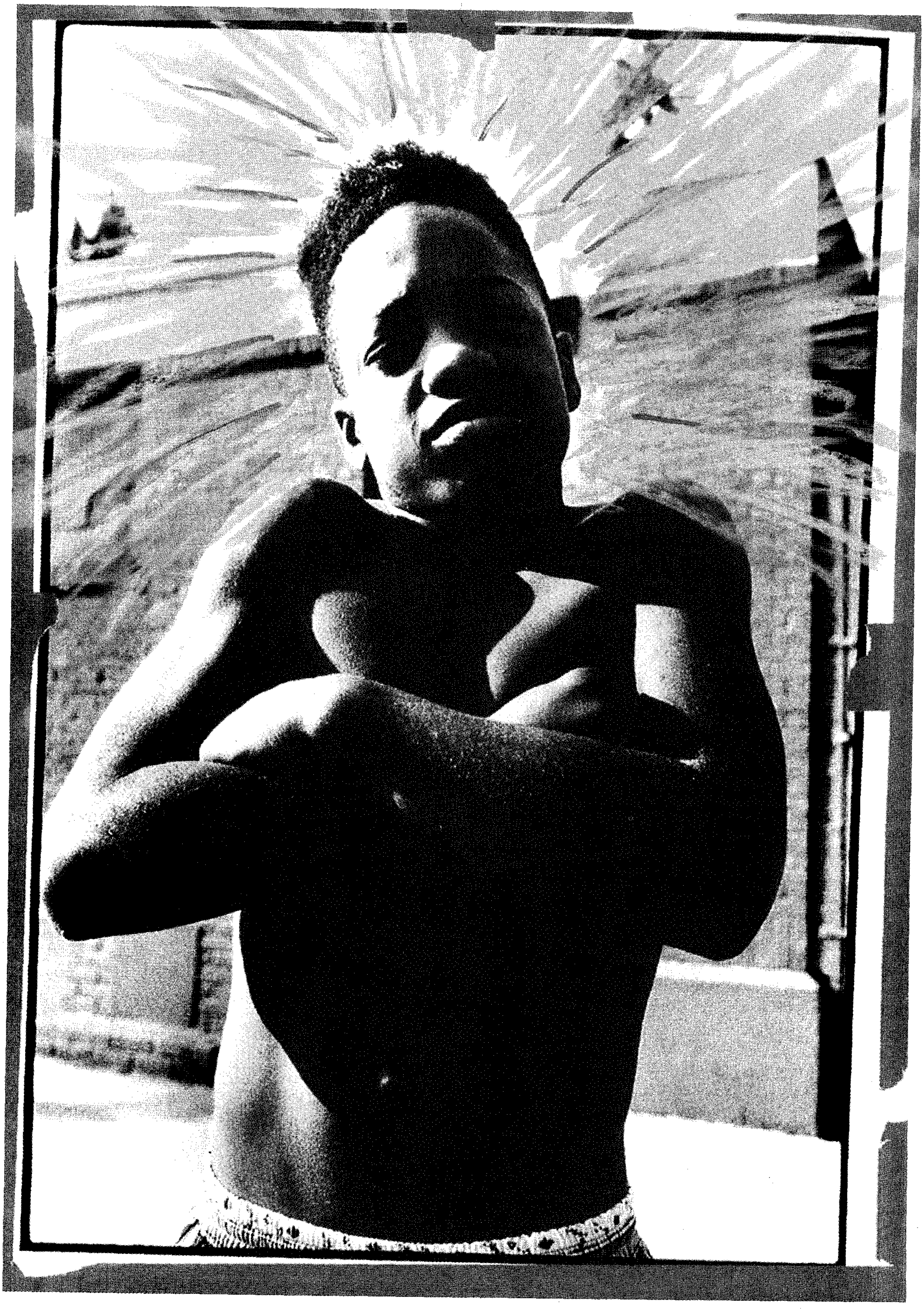
Where is the surgeon gifted enough to undertake separating these hapless conjoined? Paging Doc Puberty, arms scrubbed, smocked to the hilt, smacking the nurses on the ass and well versed in the latest techniques. More suction! Javelin and shot put—that's about right. Hormones had sent me up and airborne, tall and skinny, a knock-kneed reed, while Reggie, always chubby in the cheeks and arms, had bulged out into something round and pinchable. Through junior high, we had disentangled week by week, one new hair at a time. There were no complications of the physical separation, but what about the mental one—severing the phantom connection whereby if Reggie stubbed his toe I cried out in pain, and vice versa? By the time we left for Sag Harbor in the summer of 1985, we'd reached the point where if someone asked, "Where's Reggie?" I didn't always know.

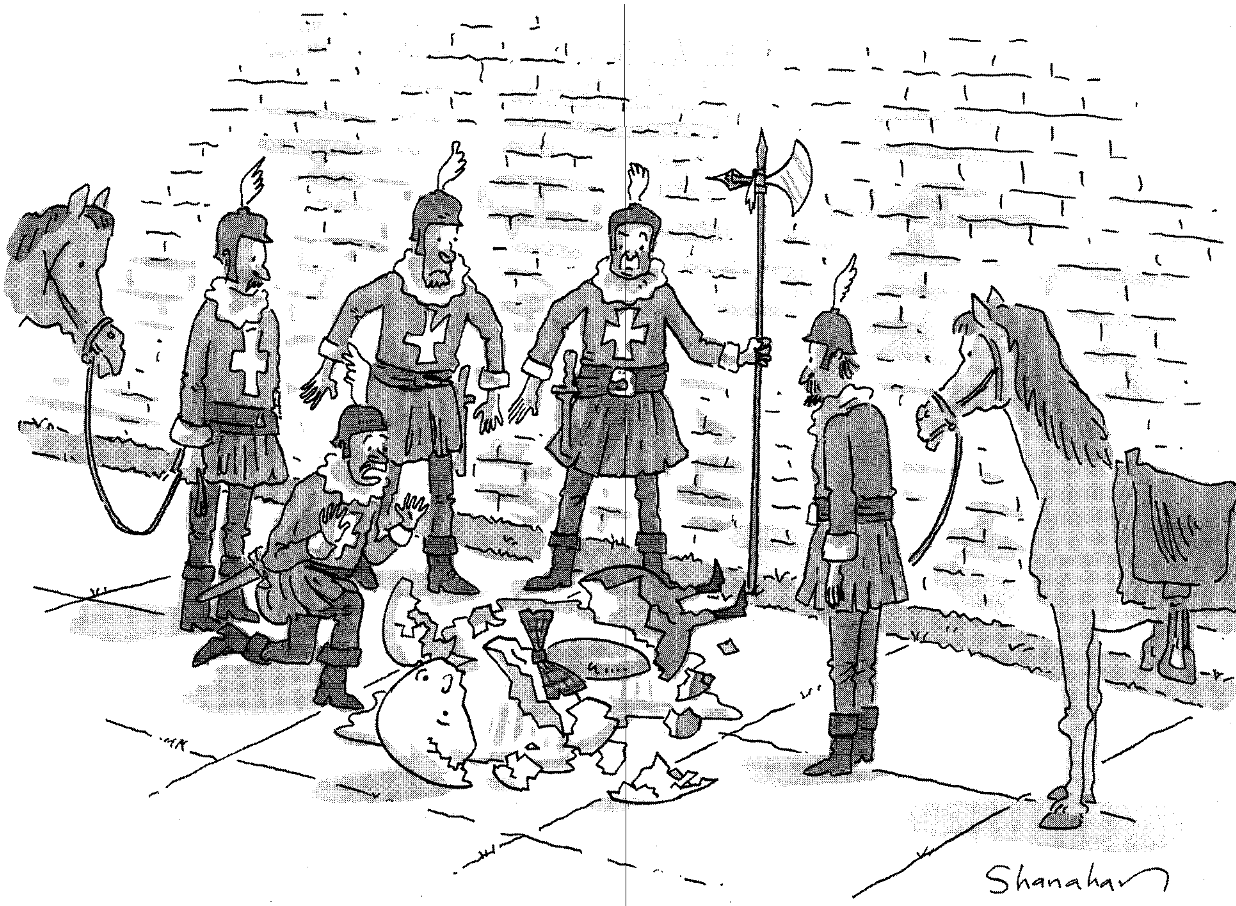
My mother said, "We're making good time." The L.I.E. had stopped slicing towns in half and now cut through untamed Nassau County greenery, always a good sign. I tried to claw my way back into sleep until we'd ditched Route 27 and cruise control and weaved down Scuttlehole Road, zipping past the white fencing and rusting wire that held back the bulging acres at the side of the road. I smelled the sweetly muddy fumes of the potato fields and pictured the cornstalks in their long regiments. My mother said, "That sweet Long Island corn," as she always did. She'd been coming out since she was a kid, her father part of the first wave of black folks from the city to start spending their summers in Sag Harbor. Which made my brother and me, and all our raggedy friends out there, the third generation. For what it was worth. Reggie had been farting for the last five minutes while pretending to be asleep. My feet scrabbled under the front seat in anticipation. Almost there. We slowed by the old red barn at the Turnpike and made the left. From there to our house was like falling down a chute: nothing left to do but prepare for landing. It was six-thirty in the morning. That was that. We were out for the summer.

All the ill shit went down on Thursdays.

Our parents went back to the city every Sunday night, leaving us alone in Sag for five days while they brought home the bacon. Mondays Reggie and I slept in, lulled by the silence in the rest of the house. The only racket was the sound of the carpenter ants gnawing the soft wood under the deck—not much of a racket at

BEN WATTS





"First, we need to stabilize his spine!"

• •

all. When we met up with the rest of our crew—most of our friends in Sag were similarly unsupervised during the week—we traded baroque schemes about what we'd get up to before all our parents came out again. The week was a vast continent for us to explore and conquer. Then suddenly we ran out of land. Wednesdays we woke up agitated, realizing that our idyll was half over. We got busy trying to cram it all in between minimum-wage shifts at the local fast-food spots. Sometimes we messed up on Wednesdays, but it was never a Thursday-size mess-up. No, Thursday we reserved for the thoroughly botched mishaps that called for shame and first aid and apologies. All the ill shit—the disasters we made with our own hands—went down on Thursdays, because on Fridays the parents returned and disasters were out of our control.

The first gun was Randy's. Which should have been a sign that we were heading toward a classic Thursday. This was Randy's first summer in our group of friends, the blame for which falls on his parents' lovemaking schedule. He was an in-betweener, living like a weed in the cracks between the micro-demographic groups of the Sag Harbor developments. Too old to hang out with us, really, and too young to be fully accepted by the older kids, he had wafted in a social netherworld for years. Now he had just finished his freshman year in college but, against usual custom, he still came out to Sag. He drove a moss-green Toyota hatchback that he claimed to have bought for a hundred bucks. Its fenders were dented and dimpled, rust mottled the frame in leprous clumps, and the inside smelled like hippie anarchists on the lam had made it their commune. But who was I to cast aspersions? Randy had a car, he was old enough to buy us beer, and for this we accepted him into our tribe and overlooked his shortcomings.

I usually didn't go to Randy's—he didn't have a hanging-out house. But everybody else was working that day. Nick at the Jonni Waffle ice-cream shop, where I worked, too, Clive bar-backing at the Long Wharf Restaurant, Reggie and Bobby flipping Whoppers at Burger King. I felt like I hadn't seen Reggie in weeks. We had contrary schedules, me working in town, him in Southampton. When we overlapped in the house we were usually too exhausted from work to even bicker properly. I had no other option but to call N.P., not my No. 1 choice, and his mother told me that he was at Randy's. Normally I would have said forget it, but there was a chance that they might be driving somewhere, an expedition to Karts-A-Go-Go or Hither Hills, and later I'd have to hear them exaggerate how much fun they had.

Randy lived in Sag Harbor Hills, on Hillside Drive, a dead-end street off our usual circuit. I knew it as the street where the Yellow House was, the one Mark

Barrows used to stay in. Mark was a nerdy kid I got along with, who came out for a few summers to visit his grandmother. When I turned the corner to Hillside, I saw that the Yellow House's yard was overgrown and the blinds were drawn, as they had been for years now. I hadn't seen Mark in a long time, but a few weeks before I'd happened to ask my mother if she knew why he didn't come out anymore, and she'd said, "Oh, it turned out that Mr. Barrows had another family."

There was a lot of Other Family going around that summer. For a while it verged on an epidemic. I found it fascinating, wondering at the mechanics of it all. One family in New Jersey and one in Kansas—what kind of cover story hid those miles? These were lies to aspire to. And who was to say which was the Real Family and which was the Other Family? Was the Sag Harbor family of our acquaintance the shadowy antimatter family, or was it the other way around—that family living in a new Delaware subdivision, the one gobbling crumbs with a smile? I pictured the kids scrambling to the front door at the sound of Daddy's car in the driveway at last (the brief phone calls from the road only magnify his absence), and Daddy taking a moment after he turned off the ignition to orient himself and figure out who and where he was this time. *Yes, I recognize those people standing in the doorway—that's my family.* Everyone tucked in tight. The family ate together and communicated. And then Daddy lit out for this Zip Code, changed his face, and everything was reversed. One man, two houses. Two faces. Which house you lived in, kids, was the luck of the draw.

Randy and N.P. were in the street. They were bent over, looking at something on the ground. I yelled, "Yo!" They didn't respond. I walked up.

"Look at that," N.P. said.

"What happened to it?" I asked. A robin was lying on the asphalt, but it didn't have the familiar tread-mark tattoo of most roadkill. It was tiny and still.

"Randy shot it," N.P. said.

Randy grinned and held up his BB rifle proudly. The metal was sleek, inky black, the fake wood grain of the stock and forearm glossy in the sun. "I got it at Caldor," he said.

We looked down at the robin again.

"It landed on the power pole and I just took the shot," Randy said. "I've been practicing all day."

"Is it dead?" I asked.

"I don't see any blood," N.P. answered.

"Maybe it's just a concussion," I said.

"You should stuff it and mount it," N.P. said.

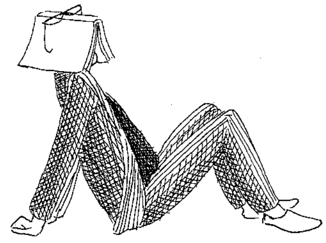
I thought, That's uncool, a judgment I'd picked up from the stoners at my "predominately white" private school, who had decided, toward the end of the spring semester, that I was O.K., and let me hang out in their vicinity, or at least linger unmolested, as a prelude to a provisional adoption by their clan next fall. I liked "uncool" because it meant that there was a code that everyone agreed on. The rules didn't change—everything in the universe was either cool or uncool, no confusion. "That's uncool," someone said, and "That is so uncool," another affirmed, the voice of justice itself, nasal and uncomplicated.

Randy let N.P. take the rifle and N.P. held it in his hands, testing its weight. It looked solid and formidable. He aimed at invisible knuckleheads loitering at the end of the street: "Stick 'em up!" He pumped the stock three times, *clack clack clack*, and pulled the trigger. And again.

"It's empty, dummy," Randy said.

To observe N.P. was to witness a haphazard choreography of joints and limbs. His invisible puppeteer had shaky hands, making it seem as if N.P. were always on the verge of busting out into some freaky dance move. Looking back, I think that his condition was more likely caused by him trying to keep his freaky dance moves in check—whatever convulsive thing he'd taken notes on at a party the week before and had just finished practicing in his room. That I wouldn't have heard of the dance was a given—the Phillie Bugaloo, the Reverse Cabbage Patch. To hang out with N.P. was to try to catch up on nine months of black slang and other sundry soulful artifacts I'd missed out on at school.

Not that I didn't learn anything at school, culturewise. The hallways between classes were a tutelage into the wide range of diversions that our country's white youth had come up with to occupy themselves. When I had free time between engineering my own humiliations, I was introduced to the hacky sack, a sort of miniature leather beanbag that compelled white kids to juggle with their feet. It was a wholesome communal activity, I saw, as they lobbed the object among each other, cheering themselves on. It appeared to foster teamwork and good will among its adherents. Bravo! There was also a kind of magical rod called a lacrosse stick. It directed the more outgoing and athletic specimens of my school to stalk the carpeted floors and obsessively wring their hands around it, as if to call forth popularity or a higher degree of social acceptance through diligent application of friction. You heard them muttering "*hut hut hut*" in a masturbatory fervor as they approached. Good stuff, in an anthropological sense. But these things were not the Technotronic Bunny Hop, or the Go Go Bump-Stomp, the assorted field exercises of black boot camp.



We called him N.P., for "Nigger, please," because no matter what came out of his mouth, that was usually the most appropriate response. He was our best liar, a raconteur of baroque teen-age shenanigans. Everything in his field of vision reminded him of some escapade he needed to share, or directed him to some escapade about to begin, as soon as all the witnesses had departed. He was dependable for nonsense like "Yo, last night, after you left, I went back to that party and got with that Queens girl. She told me she was raised strict, but I was all up in those titties! She paid me fifty dollars!"

Nigger, please.

"Yo, yo, listen: I was walking by the Miller house and I went to take a look at their Rolls, and get this, I was, like, they left the keys in the ignition. You know I took that shit for a spin. I was like Thurston Howell III up in that bitch! With Gilligan!"

Nigger, please.

Like me and Reggie, N.P. had come out to Sag every summer of his life—and even before he was born, as his mother had waded out into the bay to cool her pregnant belly. We had beaten each other up, stolen each other's toys, fallen asleep in the back seats of station wagons together as we caravanned back from double features at the Bridgehampton Drive-In, the stars scrolling beyond the back window. We were copying our parents, who had been beating each other up, eating each other's barbecue, chasing each other down the hacked-out footpaths to the beach, thirty years earlier, under the same sky.

According to the world, we were the definition of paradox: black boys with beach houses. What kind of bourgie sellout Negroes were we, with BMWs (Black Man's Wagons, in case you didn't know) in our driveways and private schools to teach us how to use a knife and fork, and sort *that* from *dat*? What about keeping it real? What about the news, the statistics, the great narrative of black pathology? Just check out the newspapers, preferably in a movie-style montage sequence, the alarming headlines dropping in-frame with a thud, one after the other: "CRISIS IN THE INNER CITY!"; "WHITHER ALL THE BABY DADDIES"; "THE TRUTH ABOUT THE WELFARE STATE: THEY JUST DON'T WANT TO WORK"; "NOT LIKE IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS."

Black boys with beach houses. It could mess with your head sometimes, if you were the susceptible sort. And if it messed with your head, got under your brown skin, there were some typical and well-known remedies. You could embrace the beach part—revel in the luxury, the perception of status, wallow without care in what it meant to be born in America with money, or the appearance of money, as the case may be. No apologies. Or you could embrace the black part—take some idea you had about what real blackness was, and make theatre out of it, your own 24/7 one-man show. Street, ghetto. Act hard, act out, act in a way that would come to be called gangsterish, pulling petty crimes, a soft kind of tough, knowing that there'd always be someone to post bail if one of your grubby schemes fell apart. Or you could embrace the contradiction. You could say, What you call paradox, I call *myself.* At least, in theory: those inclined to this remedy didn't have a lot of obvious models.

We headed into Randy's house to get some more ammo. He opened the screen door and yelled, "Mom, I'm inside with my friends!" and the sound of a TV was silenced as a door closed with a thud. Randy got the BBs from his room, then led us out through the kitchen into the back yard. Brown leaves drifted in dirty pools in the butts of chairs. Behind the house were woods, which allowed him to convert the patio into a firing range. He'd dragged the barbecue grill to the edge of the trees—I saw a trail of ashes—and around its three feet lay cans and cups riddled with tiny holes.

Steve Austin, the Six Million Dollar Man, who had been rebuilt at great expense with taxpayers' money, stood on the red dome of the barbecue, his bionic hands in eternal search of necks to throttle. Randy took aim. The action figure stared impassively, his extensive time on the operating table having granted him a stoic's quiet grace. It took five shots, Randy pumping and clacking the stock with increasing fury as we observed his shitty marksmanship. Then Steve Austin tumbled off the lid and lay on his side, his pose undisturbed in the dirt. Didn't even blink. They really knew how to make an action figure back then.

"I want to get the optional scope for greater accuracy," Randy explained, "but that costs more money."

"Lemme try that shit now," N.P. said.

I left soon after. I threw out a "You guys want to head to East Hampton to buy records?," but no one bit. I'd thought we were past playing with guns. I walked around the side of the house, and when I got to the street the bird was gone.

That was the first gun. The next was Bobby's. This one was a pistol, a replica of a 9-mm.

Bobby was still in the early stages of his transformation into that weird creature the prep-school militant. The usual schedule for good middle-class black boys and girls called for them to get militant and fashionably Afrocentric in the first semester of freshman year of college: underlining key passages in "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" and that passed-around paperback of "Black Skin, White Masks"; organizing a march or two to protest the lack of tenure for that controversial professor in the Department of Black Studies; organizing a march or two to protest the lack of a Department of Black Studies. It passed the time until business school. But Bobby got an early start on all that, returning to Sag from his sophomore year of high school with a new, clipped pronunciation of the word "whitey," and a fondness for using the phrases "white-identified" and "false consciousness" while watching "The Cosby Show." It caused problems as he fretted over his Zip Code ("Scarsdale ain't nothing but a high-class shantytown. It's a gilded lean-to") and how changing his name might affect his Ivy League prospects ("Your transcript says Bobby Emerson, but you said your name was Sadat X").

We used to make fun of him for being so light-skinned, and this probably contributed to some of his overcompensating. The joke was that, if the K.K.K. came pounding on Bobby's door and demanded, "Where the black people at?" (it's well known—the fondness of the K.K.K. for ending sentences with a preposition), he'd say, "They went thataway!" with a minstrel eye-roll and a vaudeville arm flourish. He rebelled against his genes, the Caucasian DNA in his veins square-dancing with strong African DNA. It's a tough battle, defending one flank against nature while nurture sneaks in from the east with whole battalions. He directed most of his hostile talk at his mother, who worked on Wall Street. "My mom wouldn't give me twenty dollars for the weekend. She's sucking the white man's dick all day, Morgan Stanley cracker, and can't give me twenty dollars!" His mother bore the brunt of his misguided rage, even though his father worked at Goldman Sachs and wasn't exactly a dashiki-clad community leader. But get a bunch of teen-age virgins together, and you're bound to rub up against some mother issues. Let he who is without sin cast the first plucked-out orb of Oedipal horror.

We were in Bobby's room. He had invited me over to play Lode Runner on his Apple II+, but when I got up there he dug under his mattress and pulled out a BB pistol.

I jerked my head toward the open door. "What about your grandpa?"

He pointed to his alarm clock. It was 7:35 P.M. Which meant that his grandparents had been asleep for five minutes. Bobby's parents were there only on weekends, like ours; unlike us, he was not completely unsupervised during the week. His grandparents were there to make sure that he got fed. But after seven-thirty he crawled over the wall.

"Me and N.P. went with Randy to Caldor and got one," Bobby said. "He got the silver one, but I wanted the black one. It's the joint, right? Greg Tiller's cousin has a gun like this," he added, squinting down the pistol's sight. "I saw it once at his house. You know what he's into, right?"

"No, what?"

"You know, some hardcore shit. He was in jail." He held it out. "Do you want to hold it?"

"No, that's all right."

"What are you, a pussy?"

I shrugged.

"Me and Reggie were shooting stuff over at the creek today," Bobby said. "He has good aim. He should be a sniper in the Marine Corps."

I'd seen Reggie before he went off to Burger King, asked him what he'd been up to. "Nothing," he'd said.

"Let me see that," I said. It was heavier than it looked. I curled my finger around the trigger. O.K. Got the gist. I pretended to study it for a moment more, then gave it back to him.

"I'm going to bring this shit to school," Bobby said. He put his crazy face on. "Stick up some pink motherfuckers. *Bla-blam!*"

Which was bullshit. Hunting preppies—the Deadliest Game of All—would have cut into his daily vigil outside the college counsellor's office. This BB-gun shit was making people act like dummies.

To wit: he pointed it at me. "Hands in the air!"

I shielded my eyes with my hand. "Get that shit outta my face!"

He laughed. "Hot oil! Hot oil!" he said, rolling his eyes manically.

Reggie had started saying "Hot oil! Hot oil!" whenever I bossed him around or said something lame. After the twentieth time, I asked him why he kept saying that, and he said that there was a semi-retarded guy who worked at Burger King through a special program, and he always got agitated when he walked by the fryers, squealing "Hot oil! Hot oil!" to remind himself.

"Don't worry. I got the safety on," Bobby said, pulling the trigger. A BB shot out, hit the wall, ricocheted into his computer monitor, bounced against the window, and disappeared under his bed. "Sorry, man! Sorry, sorry!" he yelped. Downstairs, one might conjecture, Grandpa stirred in his sleep.

At least it was a plastic BB. Randy had copper BBs. The plastic ones didn't hurt that much. The copper ones could do some real damage, as I saw the following week when I found myself out on "target practice." We were on our way to Bridgehampton to walk around, Randy driving, Clive, N.P., and me. Then Randy pulled into the parking lot of Mashashimuet Park.

"I thought we were going to Bridgehampton," I said.

"After we go shooting," Randy said.

We walked onto the trails behind the park. N.P. carried a moldy cardboard box. When I asked him what was inside, he said, "That would be telling."

Randy had the spot all picked out. The abandoned Karmann Ghia. It made sense. We'd tried to make a plaything of it many a boredom-crazed afternoon, but it was too rusted to incorporate into high jinks beyond throwing rocks through its dwindling windows. (We were a tetanus-phobic group, lockjaw being the most sinister villain we could imagine.) But not anymore. The guns gave us the distance to hasten the car's ruin.

Randy's first attempts were unspectacular, his BBs zipping straight through the car's exterior, leaving a tiny, fingertip-size hole you had to get up close to see. But, as his aim improved and he figured out the key pressure points, a BB disintegrated a nice section of the car's weakened frame. "You see how I pump it?" he asked rhetorically. "The more you pump it, the faster the f.p.s." Feet per second, I guessed, and later confirmed when I sat on some ketchup-stained rifle literature in the back seat of Randy's car. "Low f.p.s. is good if you just want to scare a deer or another critter off your property. Higher f.p.s. is when you really want to send a message." *Yee-haw!*

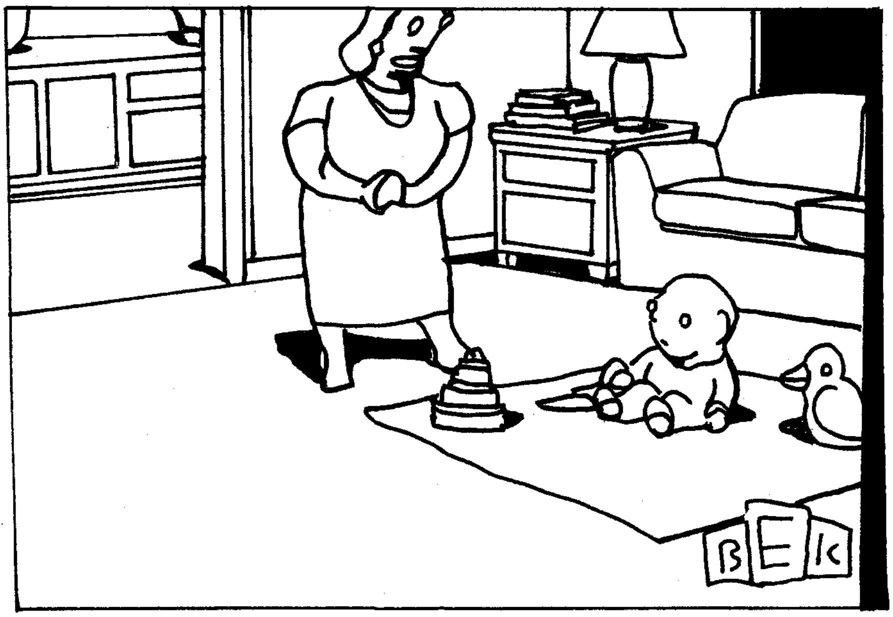
N.P. and Clive took turns with N.P.'s pistol—Randy was clinging tight to his baby today—and although it was diverting for a while, I started to wonder if we'd have enough time to drive to Bridgehampton and back before my shift.

"We just got here, dag," N.P. said.

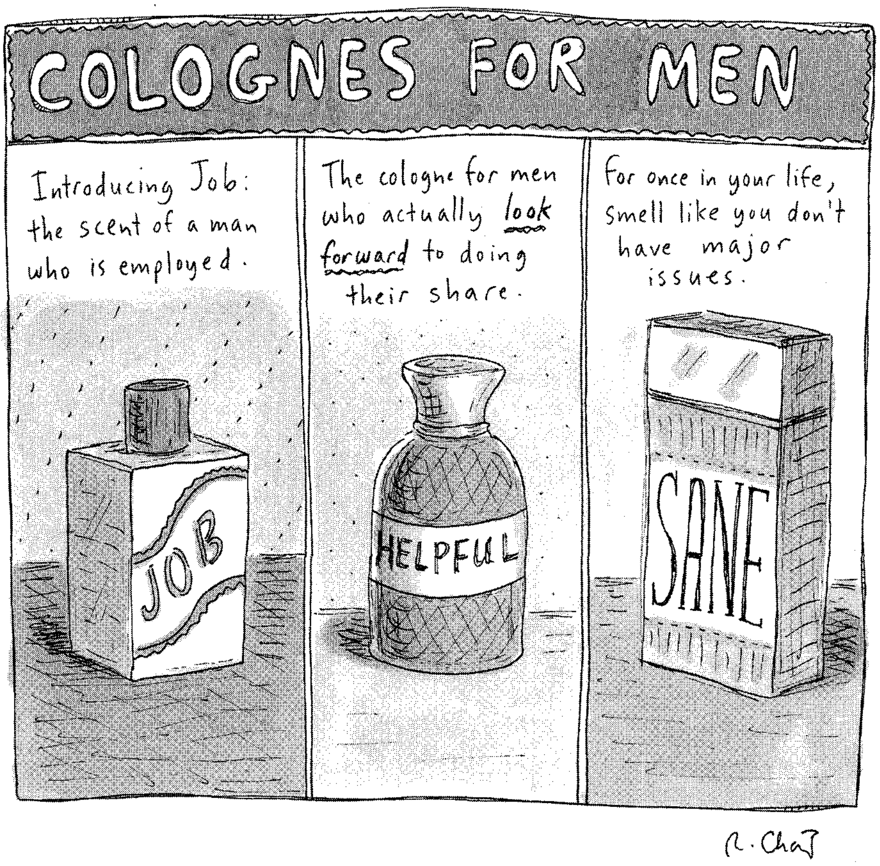
"I'm not ready to go," Randy said as he reloaded his rifle.

Clive had taken a few shots. He seemed to be enjoying himself. "Why don't you go ahead and try it?" he asked me.

Clive had always been the leader of our group. He was just cool, no joke. He was that rare thing among us: halfway normal, socialized, capable, and charismatic. Tall and muscular, he had the physical might to beat us up, but he broke up fights instead, separating combatants while dodging their whirling fists, and no one complained. Plus, he knew how to talk to girls, had girlfriends, plural. Good-looking girlfriends, too, by all accounts, with all their teeth and everything. Last summer he'd



"I'm proud of you for making a gurgle."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even dated an older woman—in her twenties! Who lived in Springs! Who had a kid! He had his problems, like the rest of us, but he hadn't let them deform his character. Not back then.

I took N.P.'s gun. Clive offered me the carton of BBs. In their small blue box, the copper BBs turned molten in the sun. N.P. said, "Let's break out the stuff," and opened the box he'd brought along. It was filled with items scavenged from his basement—a porcelain vase, a bunch of drinking glasses with groovy sixties designs, a Nerf football with tooth marks in it, a bottle of red nail polish, and other junk chosen for its breakable quality.

"Here, do the radio," N.P. said. He dug into the box and perched an old transistor radio on top of the Karmann Ghia. I took my time. I wiped the sweat off my forehead. I held my shooting arm with my left hand, gunslinger style. Drew a bead.

The radio made a sad *ting*, tottered in cheap suspense, and fell into the dirt. I'd hit it toward the top, knocking it off balance. The words "center of gravity" came to me, secondhand track-and-field lingo from my vain attempt to place out of P.E. that spring. I couldn't throw a ball worth shit with my girly arm, but somehow I'd hit the radio. N.P. whooped it up, slapping me on the back. Clive offered a terse "Good shooting," like a drill instructor trying not to be too affirming. I grinned.

We positioned the other relics from N.P.'s basement. The vase didn't explode, but each time it was hit another jagged section fell off, so that we could see more of its insides. It finally collapsed on its own while we were reloading. I aimed at an old lampshade of rainbow-colored glass, and, though I didn't recreate the swell marksmanship of my first attempt, I had to admit it was fun. Not the shooting itself, but the satisfaction of discovering a new way to kill a chunk of summer. It was like scraping out a little cave, making a new space in the hours to hide in for a time.

I placed the final victim on top of the car—the neon-green Nerf football. We'd saved it for last because nothing topped Nerf abuse. It was Randy's turn, but, as it was N.P.'s Nerf ball, he established dibs. It turned out that N.P. *couldn't hit* it. Time after time. We'd been out there in the sun for hours and we were dehydrated. The rush, the novelty, was gone, and we all felt it. Finally, N.P. gave up and handed his pistol to Clive. Randy said, "N.P. couldn't hit the broad side of a barn," that hoary marksman's slur.

N.P. exploded. He always had putdowns to spare, but now he grasped after his trademark finesse. "I could hit your fat fuckin' ass fine, you fuckin' Rerun-from-'What's Happ'ning'-looking motherfucker."

"What the fuck did you say?"

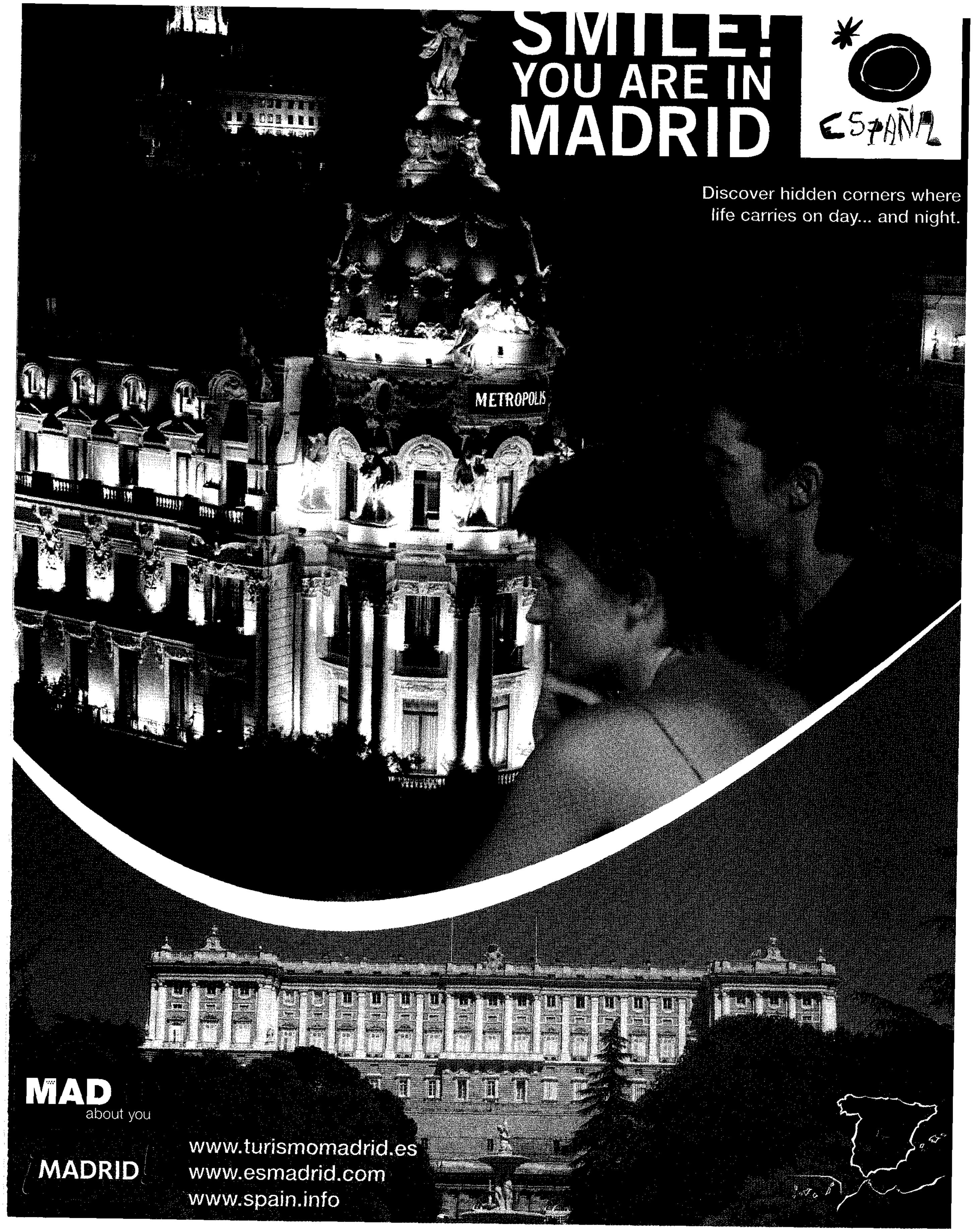
"You fuckin' biscuit-eatin' bitch!"

Randy's hours of picking off his old toys in the back yard finally found their true outlet. He stroked his rifle, *clack clack*, and started shooting the dirt at N.P.'s feet. "Dance, nigger, dance!" he shouted, in Old West saloon fashion, which was pretty fucked-up, and the copper BBs detonated in the ground in brief puffs. N.P. skipped from foot to foot, his bright-white sneakers flashing like surrender flags. "Dance!" I don't think Randy was aiming at N.P.'s feet, but I couldn't be sure. What if he missed? One of those BBs, depending on the f.p.s., would rip through the sneaker, definitely. How much deeper I didn't know.

Clive and I shouted for Randy to knock it off. Clive took a step toward Randy, hands out defensively. He was fast enough to rush him, but nevertheless. Randy glared at Clive—I swear he made a calculation—and then lowered the rifle, with an "I was just playing."

N.P. charged Randy, cursing like a motherfucker. Clive restrained him. "That's uncool," I said, but no one chimed in with the other-shoe "That's so uncool." The boys boiled off in their neutral corners, and we left soon after, scratching the Bridgehampton excursion without discussion.

That was on a Wednesday. The next Monday, we were back at the threshold of another empty week we needed to fill. We convened at our place that night: Reggie, Randy, Bobby, Clive, and Nick, who was living out there full time now. He'd been a summer kid, one of our gang through many adventures, but something had happened between his parents—we never asked about family processes, only accepted the results when informed—and now he and his mom were living in Sag Harbor Hills. He went to Pierson High School, was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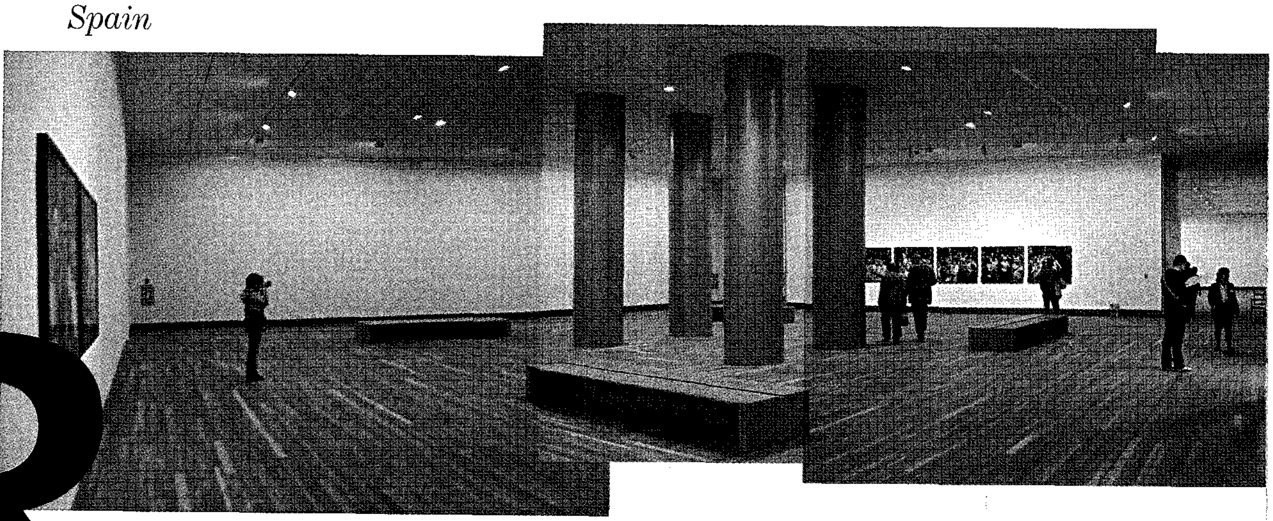

R*el in Madrid*

Spain's lively, cosmopolitan capital has a well-earned reputation for offering some of Europe's best night life and cuisine. Revelers from around the world come to celebrate in style at the city's avant-garde dance clubs, intimate bars, chic restaurants, and romantic cafés.

The customary way to kick off an evening is with cocktails and tapas, small dishes of olives, cheese, sausages, and specialties that sate the appetite before notoriously nocturnal Madrileños eat dinner. Some of Madrid's most popular tapas restaurants are along Calle Cava Baja just south of the Plaza Mayor, where **Taberna Tempranillo** serves these typical treats. **El Bocaíto** in the bohemian Chueca neighborhood is another favorite destination on the *tapeo*—a multi-stop tapas feast.

After barhopping, friends meet for a leisurely dinner, often not until after 9 P.M. Choosing a restaurant may be one of the tougher decisions of the evening, but a few notable options are **La Broche**, recent winner of two Michelin stars for its creative twist on Catalan cooking, **Santceloni**, another Michelin two-star honoree specializing in fresh ingredients, and **Casa Lucio**, a city favorite for traditional Spanish cuisine.

Besides its vibrant dining scene, Madrid offers a wide range of cultural activities. The prestigious **Teatro Real** hosts concerts and operas throughout the year, and **La Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas**, Madrid's legendary bullring, is also a popular venue for rock concerts and shows.

As dinner winds down and performances end, the citywide party moves into high gear. Crowds gather at clubs around midnight, and everyone dresses up to dance until dawn—locals rarely wear jeans or sneakers to bars and clubs. The grand finale to a night on the town is the typical breakfast ritual: thick, hot chocolate and sweet, fried *churros*.

By day, Madrid has exceptional museums to explore. The **Prado Museum**, which nearly doubled its size with a new light-filled wing, is celebrating its 189th birthday. The permanent collection includes works by Fra Angelico, Tintoretto, and Hieronymous Bosch. Also in its collection, the museum has many Spanish pieces, among them, Goya's "The Third of May." On temporary exhibition until January 6th is Rembrandt: Painter of Stories, focusing on his biblical and historical references.

Also along the Paseo del Prado, the **Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum** has two of the top private collections of twentieth-century art, with works by Titian, Kandinsky, and Rothko among other highlights. The museum also recently expanded, with sixteen new galleries. Completing Madrid's "Golden Triangle of Art," the **Reina Sofia National Art Museum** specializes in contemporary art—Picasso's "Guernica" is part of the permanent collection. Day or night, visitors can revel in the treasures of this multicultural city.

TOP: NEW EXTENSION OF THE PRADO MUSEUM ©AROTIPO
WINTER TOMATOES ©TSUKASA SHIMAYO

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technically a townie, by definitions that he himself would have upheld, and was embarrassed by this. "This whole Sag thing is just temporary," he frequently told us, to reassure himself. I saw that he had a new gold chain. His old one had said "Nick," in two-inch letters. His new chain said "Big Nick," in two-inch letters, and was studded with tiny white rhinestones.

"Nice," I said.

"Got my man in Queens Plaza to do it," he said.

My father would've kicked me out of the house if I'd walked in with a gold chain around my neck. Not that it ever would've occurred to me to get a gold chain. But Nick! Circumstances had forced Nick to embrace the early-eighties fashions of urban black boys with verve and unashamed gusto. He loved two-tone jeans, gray in the front, black in the back, months out of fashion but authentic city artifacts out there in Sag. The laces on his Adidases were puffy and magnificent, and if he wasn't wearing his Jonni Waffle T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up, juvenile-delinquent style, he wore a Knicks jersey that showed off his muscles. Muscles that had been produced by lugging his enormous boom box around. His radio was the most ridiculous thing, the biggest radio any of us had ever seen or ever would see. It was a yard wide, half as much tall, a gleaming silver slab of stereophonic dynamism. It didn't do much. Played the terrible East End radio stations. Played cassettes. Made a dub at the touch of a button. For all I know it was mostly air inside, save for the bushel of double-D batteries it took to power the thing, and which Nick spent most of his wages on.

Randy had brought beer, which was a new feature of our lives that summer. The drinking age was nineteen then, which made Randy legal and Clive tall enough to buy take-out six-packs at the corner bar unchallenged. One beer and I was buzzed, two beers I was drunk. We asked one another, "Which one are you on?," to see who was ahead and who was falling behind. Pointing at the empties for proof.

"Why don't you open the screen door to let the air in here?" Randy said.

"It's a screen door. The air comes through," Reggie said. "Plus the mosquitoes will get us."

"Then leave the lights out. They won't come in," Randy said. "I'm hot."

Reggie opened the screen door, and we hunkered in the gloom. We had three days to fill. Clive suggested night blue-fishing off Montauk. But the rest of us agreed that it was too expensive to go more than once a season, given the realities of minimum wage, and we'd already been once. Reggie, who this summer had decided that he was no longer afraid of the water, disavowing a key tenet of the men in our family, said that we should borrow Nick's uncle's motorboat again. But Nick said that his uncle was having the hull refinished. Bobby busted out that old chestnut Ask Mrs. Upland if We Can Go in Her Pool, but Clive and Nick immediately said no dice. Mrs. Upland's son had died five years before. He'd grown up in Sag in a crew with Clive's father and Nick's father, and the last time they'd used her pool she'd kept calling them by their fathers' names and it had creeped them out.

Stumped, and it wasn't even August yet.

"Let's show dicks," Randy suggested.

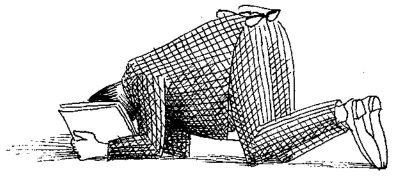
Cricket, cricket.

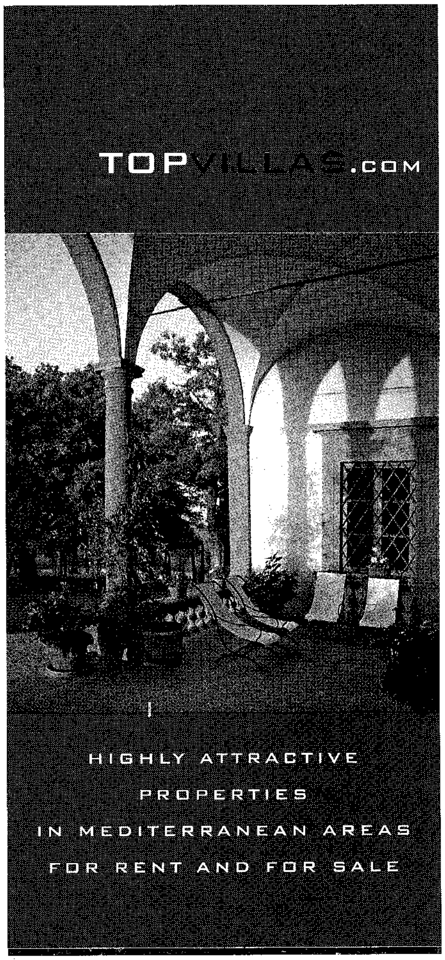
"Why the hell would we do that?" Clive asked, finally.

"To see who has the biggest dick," Randy said.

"Next time we go to Karts-A-Go-Go, we should race for money and time ourselves to see who's the fastest," I said, steering the proceedings like a good host. I wasn't much of a go-cart driver, but I thought the novelty of the scheme might appeal.

Bobby turned on his m.c. voice: "One Two Three, in the place to be." And Reggie said, "All right!" They started their routine and I rolled my eyes in the darkness. Bobby and my brother had memorized the lyrics to Run-D.M.C.'s "Here We Go" and had to perform it at least ten times a day. Bobby was Run, Reggie was D.M.C. Bobby took the lead, Reggie sidekicking after each line like an exclamation point. Back and

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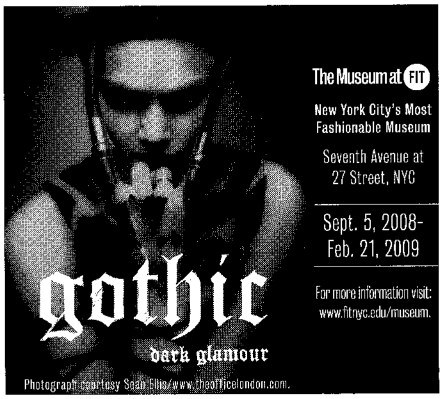
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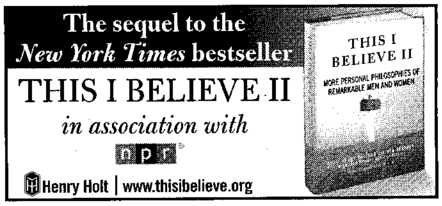
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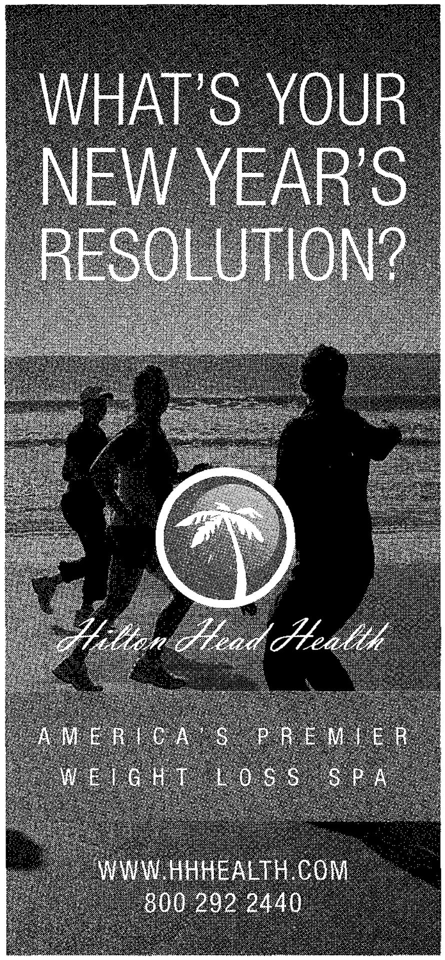
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forth, a real fucking duo. Clive kept the beat with his hands.

"It's like that, y'all."

"That y'all!"

"It's like that, y'all."

"That y'all."

"It's like that-a-tha-that, a-like that, y'all."

"That y'all!"

"Cool chief rocker, I don't drink vodka, but keep a bag of cheeba inside my locker."

"HUH!"

"Go to school every day."

"HUH!"

"Always time to get paid."

"HA HUH!"

"'Cause I'm rockin' on the mic until the break of day!"

Run-D.M.C. boasting about staying in school—quaint days in the history of hip-hop. To my chagrin, I had never heard the song before Reggie and Bobby started singing it. I thought I knew all of Run-D.M.C.'s records, the self-titled début and "King of Rock," but I was a square. The song was a limited-edition live recording made at a club called the Funhouse, taped "Funky fresh for 1983," according to the lyrics. Bobby had introduced the song to Reggie, who dubbed a copy on Nick's boom box.

Distracted, no one followed up on my Karts-A-Go-Go plan. In my jealousy, I pictured Bobby and Reggie performing their bit behind the counter at Burger King, their clubhouse where I was not allowed, in their paper Burger King caps and hairnets, while the retarded guy chimed in with "Hot oil! Hot oil!" like an amen.

We continued to brainstorm. No progress. Then someone said, "We should have a BB-gun fight," and it stuck. The only thing to silence the new hunger. That was that. Our house was full of mosquitoes for a week, and Reggie and I had to sleep with our heads under the sheets to keep them out of our ears.

The next day, Randy drove me and Clive to Caldor, the East End's one-stop emporium for action figures and beach towels, insect-repelling candles and beach chairs, lighter fluid and flip-flops. After consulting our savings, kept in battered envelopes in topnotch hiding places around the house to prevent each other from skimming some off the top, Reggie and I had decided that it would be best if we shared a BB pistol, with one of us borrowing Randy's spare for the fight itself. This arrangement would also allow me to keep track of Reggie's gun activity. I was sure he was going to hurt himself. Bobby would cook up some dumb idea and Reggie would go along with it and he'd get hurt. I had to look out for him; in fact, the night of the Mosquito Summit, I decided to try to get the BB-gun fight scheduled to overlap with one of his shifts at Burger King. We all missed key shenanigans because of work. There was no reason that this couldn't be one of Reggie's turns to listen to glorious tales and rue his absence until the end of time.

Reggie and I hadn't had toy guns, growing up, so we had to catch up. Green or orange water pistols had been O.K., but anything else had sent our father speechifying. "That's some white-man shit," he'd say, confiscating the cap gun from a birthday-party goody bag. "Whitey loves his guns. Shoot somebody—he loves that shit. So let him. No kid of mine is going to get that mind-set." I practiced solo, deep in the recesses of the creek, out of sight of beachgoers and homeowners. Why startle the happy vacationers with the sight of a skinny, slouching teen-ager, the sun glinting off his braces and his handgun?

When it was Reggie's turn to practice, he'd disappear with Bobby for one of their secret confabs, probably a razzle-dazzle rapping/shooting extravaganza of great theatre. *It's like that, y'all.* Not that the rest of us were immune. N.P. tucked his piece into his belt like a swaggering cop on the take or the cracker sheriff of a Jim Crow Podunk. Clive was observed busting a Dirty Harry move when he thought we weren't looking, and Randy was often found cradling his rifle to his chest, a gruesome sneer on his face, as if he were about to take an East Hampton bistro hostage. I myself favored a two-handed promising-rookie pose, the kind used by "Starsky and Hutch" extras who got clipped before the first commercial and were avenged for the rest of the hour. "He woulda

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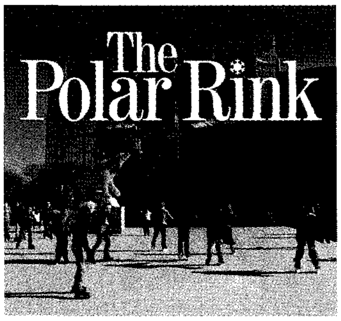

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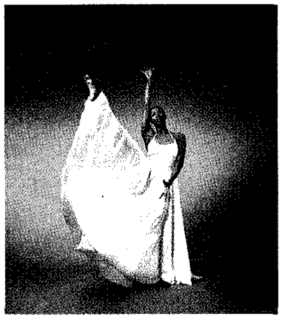

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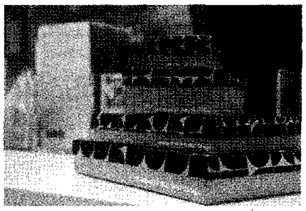

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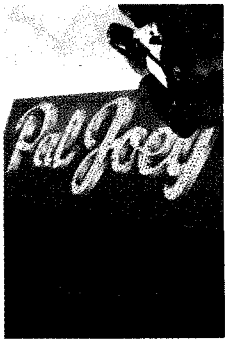

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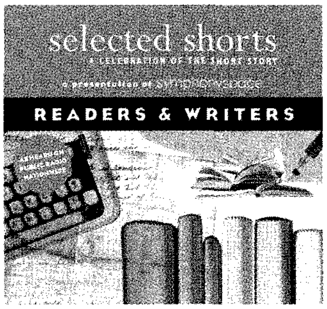
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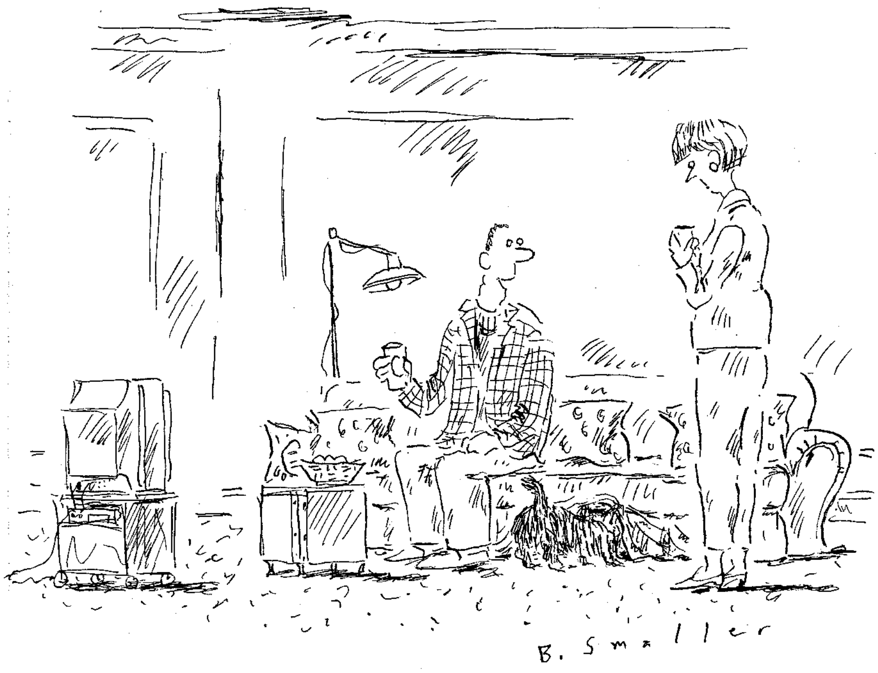


"I've trained him to hunt down the remote."

• •

made a good cop, just like his old man."

It was only a matter of time before we started posing for album covers. Not one from innocent '85, but one from a few years later, after the music had changed from this:

Rhymes so def
Rhymes rhymes galore
Rhymes that you've never even heard before
Now if you say you heard my rhyme
We gonna have to fight
'Cause I just made the motherfuckers up last night

to this:

"Hey yo, Cube, there go that motherfucker right there."
"No shit. Watch this . . . Hey, what's up, man?"
"Not too much."
"You know you won, G."
"Won what?"
"The wet T-shirt contest, motherfucker!" [*sounds of gunfire*]

Lyrics from the aforementioned "Here We Go" and "Now I Gotta Wet 'Cha," copyright 1992, by Ice Cube, born the same year as me, who grew up on Run-D.M.C. just like we all did. "Wet 'cha," as in "wet your shirt with blood." Something happened in those nine years. Something happened that changed the terms, and we went from fighting (*I'll knock that grin off your face*) to annihilation (*I will wipe you from this earth*). How we got from here to there is a key passage in the history of young black men that no one cares to write.

On Wednesday, we went over the rules at Clive's house. No shooting at the eyes or face—that was a no-brainer. No cheating—if you're hit, you're hit, don't be a bitch about it. Sag Harbor Hills was the boundary of the battlefield—no cutting through to other developments and sneaking back to emerge ambush-style. I said that we should all wear goggles, just in case, and to my surprise the others seemed to agree. There was talk of synchronizing watches, but no one wore a watch in the summer except me, because summer is its own time and I was the only one who didn't know this. When the scheduling question came up, I said, "Tomorrow night?," and everyone but Reggie was free then. The weekend was out—too many people around—and no one wanted to put it off till the following week. Reggie was benched and I was glad.

Not that it could have gone down any other way. Although we had hatched the plan for a BB-gun war on a Monday, there was no question that in the end it would go down on a Thursday.

There was just one matter left to discuss: the issue of Randy's rifle and the f.p.s. A metal BB from one of the pistols, at the range we were going to be shooting at one another, would hurt a little but not that much, according to hearsay. Pump the rifle enough times, however, and it was going to break the skin.

"But if I can't pump I'll be at a disadvantage," Randy moaned.

"We have to figure out how many rifle pumps is equal to the standard pistol shot," I offered.

"How do we figure that out?" Clive asked.

"We can test it out on Marcus," Randy said.

Marcus said, "O.K.," and we headed out into the yard.

Marcus was a key player in our group, in that he reassured us that there was someone more unfortunate than ourselves. He possessed three primary mutant powers. 1) He was able to attract to his person all the free-floating derision in the vicinity through a strange magnetism. 2) He bent light waves, rendering the rest of us invisible to bullies; when Marcus was present, the big kids were incapable of seeing us, picking on him exclusively, delivering noogies, knuckle punches, and Indian rope burns to his waiting flesh. 3) He had superior olfactory capability; he could smell barbecue from four miles away, attaining such mastery that he could ascertain, with the faintest nostril quivering, if the stuff on the grill had just been thrown on, or was about to come off, and acted accordingly. Like a knife and fork, he appeared around dinner time. Call him a mooch to hurt his feelings, and he'd just smile, wipe his mouth on his wrist, and snatch the last piece of chicken—probably a wing, damn him.

Marcus took off his shirt, and Randy loaded his rifle. "Let's start at one," he said.

I said, "Marcus, why don't you turn around so it doesn't go in your face or something?"

Marcus turned around and gritted his teeth. There was a routine he did when one of us got mad at him, pulling up his shirt and clowning, "Please, Massa, Massa, Massa, please," anticipating the whip, "Roots"-style. He had the same expression on his face now. Randy stood four yards away, aimed, and fired. The BB hit Marcus in the spine and bounced off.

"Shit, that didn't hurt," Marcus said. "Do I have a mark?"

We told him no. Randy said, "Then let's try three times," and stepped closer.

"Ow," Marcus cried. But it still didn't break the skin.

Clack clack clack clack clack. I noticed that Randy kept creeping closer between shots, but I didn't say anything. Neither did Clive.

Five times and Marcus screamed and a crescent of blood smiled on his skin. "So don't pump it more than four times," Clive said.

"Yo, that hurt," Marcus said.

"Let's make it no more than two, just to be safe," I said.

I couldn't sleep that night. I was thinking about Thursday and its tally over the years: the time N.P. broke his ankle sneaking into his bedroom window after hanging out late at the Rec Room with those townie girls; the time I didn't properly hose off the lounge chairs on the deck, and the next day I got confined to the property line for a week and obediently stuck around like a fool even when my parents were out of town and would never know; fight after fight, too many to count. When the chain fell off Marcus's bike and he smeared his bare feet all the way across the gravel of the Hill trying to stop—that was Thursday all over. Our weekly full moon.

I woke up late. I heard noises in the living room. It should have been quiet. "Why aren't you at work?" I asked my brother.

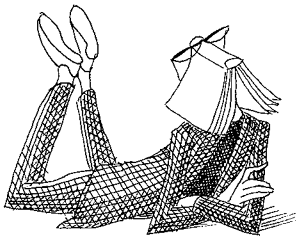
"I switched my shift so I can be in the war," he said.

I told him he couldn't go. He'd get hurt. "When Mom and Dad are away, I'm in charge," I reminded him.

"You're not in charge of me."

"Yes, I am."

"What are you going to do—tell on me?" he said, and he had me there. I couldn't rat him out or else I'd get it, too.



He went off to get in some last-minute practice.

At fight time, I headed up Walker. I passed the stop sign at Meredith and noticed that it was freckled with silver, the red paint chipped away—target practice for one of our friends, probably Marcus, who lived two houses down. Nice cluster on the "T" and the "O." He had good aim, depending on how far away he'd been standing.

When I got to Clive's house, we were all there, except for Nick. He'd called, whispering about how his mom was home and he couldn't get out of the house with his BB gun. Marcus suggested that we start without him.

"But then we'd have uneven teams," Bobby said.

"One of us can sit out," I said. "Youngest first?"

"Four is better than three," Clive announced, and we caved. By the time Nick arrived, it was almost dark, so we got busy making teams. Everybody wanted to be on Clive's team because Clive's team always won, but Randy was a factor with his rifle expertise. Reggie said, "Me and Bobby are a mini-team because we've been practicing together," and I was appalled. Reggie and I had never not been a mini-team, what with the whole "Benji 'n' Reggie, Benji 'n' Reggie" singsong thing through the years. The only thing that had kept me calm that afternoon was knowing that I could protect him if he was on my team. Send him on some crazy mission out of the way. He didn't look at me.

The final teams were: me, Clive, Marcus, and Nick on the Vice (for "Miami Vice") and Randy, Bobby, Reggie, and N.P. on the Cool Chief Rockers. When Nick finally got his ass over there, I pulled out the paint goggles I'd rescued from the cobwebs under our deck, and N.P. said, "Goggles?"

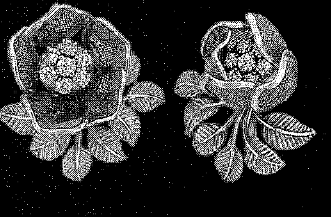
"No one said anything about goggles."

"I don't got goggles."

"I'm not wearing any pussy-ass goggles," Marcus said. Nor was Reggie—I didn't even bother to fight with him about it. I didn't wear them, either.

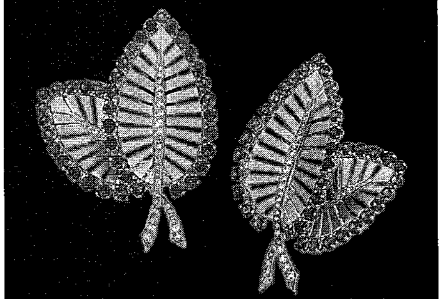
The sky was getting dark. We went over the rules again and then it was on. We started counting to two hundred, per the guidelines, as we ran away, scattering according to haywire teen-age logic toward the highway, toward the beach. I jogged around the corner, checking to see if I was in anyone's sights, and jumped

SHRUBSOLE
Gold & Diamond Flower Earrings, France, c. 1955



Gold & Diamond Ring by Rene Boivin, Paris, c. 1940

Gold Leaf Earrings with Montana Sapphires by Raymond Yard, New York, c. 1955



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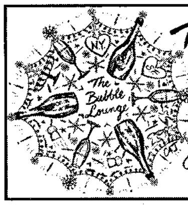

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into the undeveloped lot next to the Nichols House. I waded in deep enough that I couldn't be seen from the road, but shallow enough that I could see anyone coming. Fifty-two, fifty-three. Getting there. It was almost too dark to play at this point, but the poor visibility would help me. I was going to wait for one of the Cool Chief Rockers to recon my way and then ambush him, a favorite tactic of mine to this day. Wait for the right moment in an argument with a loved one, then ambush her with some hurt I've held on to for years, the list of indictments nurtured in the darkness of my hideout, and say, "Gotcha!" See how you ruined me. If I was lucky, Bobby and Reggie would stop right in front of where I was hiding, to regroup or break into song, and I'd take them both out. A firefly blinked into existence, drew half a word in the air. Then it was gone.

I moved closer to the street so that I could get a better view and someone hit me in the face with a rock.

Hot oil! Hot oil!

A rock. That's what it felt like. My head snapped back and the top half of my face throbbed like I'd been slapped. I cursed and stumbled out into the street. Who throws rocks at a BB-gun fight? I yelled for a time-out.

Randy popped out of the woods on the other side of the street. "I hit you," he said, in surprise and pride.

"Why are you throwing rocks?"

"No, it was a BB."

I poked gingerly around my left eye. He'd hit me in the socket, in the hollow between the tear duct and the eyebrow. There may be a proper anatomical name for that part of the eye socket, but I don't know it. It felt like a rock. I couldn't see out of that eye. There was stuff in it. Randy reached forward and I batted his hand away. I heard N.P. say, "What's up?" I traced my fingertip along the lumpy hole in my face, the stinging flesh. It had broken the skin. He'd pumped it more than two times.

"What happened?" Clive asked.

"Benji's out. I hit him," Randy declared.

"I'm not out," I said. "He pumped it more than twice! I'm bleeding! He's disqualified!"

I touched the hole in my face and staggered into the cone of the street light. Fat June bugs crawled over each other on the ground in their wretched street-light ritual. I held up my finger. It was bloody.

Bobby and Reggie appeared, and then all the Cool Chief Rockers and Vicers, guns dangling. Reggie grabbed my arm and wanted to know if I was all right. I hadn't heard him sound so concerned in a long time. I shook my head drunkenly. "What the hell did you do, Randy?" Reggie said.

"He pumped it more than twice," I said. Everybody murmured "dag," in their disparate dag registers. When they got a look at the wound, they re-dagged at how close it had come to my eye.

Then I realized the Horrible Thing. I probed around the wound. The skin was tough and swollen, but beneath that was something harder, like a pearl. "It's still in there," I said.

Randy didn't believe it. "Let me see," he said, his hands out.

"Get away from him," Reggie shouted. He stepped between us. "Benji," he started, squinting at the bloody hole in the poor light, "you have to go to the hospital."

"We can't do that," Marcus said. "We'll get in trouble."

"We'll all be in some serious trouble when our parents come out tomorrow."

I looked around. They had decided. Even Clive, who in his alpha-dogness could have grabbed Randy's car keys and taken me if he wanted, fuck everybody. He was looking down the street, as if he heard his parents pulling up, avoiding my gaze. Half-gaze.

Randy said, "How are you going to get there?"

"That's uncool," Reggie said. He was my brother. I loved him. The way he said it, I knew. He'd found the stoners, too. Maybe he was going to be all right after all.

"That's so uncool," I said. Justice according to brothers and stoners: If someone needs to go to the hospital and you've got the car, you have to take them.

Reggie said, "Bobby, your grandpa can drive us!"

Bobby got weaselly. "He's asleep—look, it's dark."

"I don't have to go to the hospital. I'm

"I'm burning my little black dresses and moving upstate."

O.K.," I said. Reggie protested, but everyone else was so thoroughly relieved that it was someone else's Thursday that the point was moot. I'd take one for the team—I'd take the hit because that's what I did. The other guys turned on Randy for having put them in this position, bitching about the pumping and whether his aiming for my face was an accident or not. He didn't give an inch—"It just happened"—but he did offer me "automatic shotgun for two weeks" as compensation.

My plan was to go home and try to squeeze the BB out, pimple-style. My brother and I walked away. I had one palm over my eye and my other hand on his shoulder.

In the bathroom mirror, my eye looked disgusting. Like I'd gone a few rounds with a real heavyweight. The socket was all swollen, and blood was trickling down over my nose and older, dried-up trickles of blood. I washed my face and got a better look. I could feel the BB in there. I couldn't move it. It was lodged in the flesh or something. Reggie hovered around, trying to be helpful, but he was freaking me out so I asked him to give me a minute. I tried to wiggle the BB again, applying the time-honored zit-popping principles of strategic leverage like a modern-day Archimedes. Nothing happened, and the inflamed flesh was so tender that I couldn't really have at it. Blood with dark little bits in it dribbled over my fingers. We'd thought it all out and decided that metal BBs were O.K. because, in theory, they weren't going to break the skin, but now I had a tetanus-covered time bomb in my head. I was going to wake up with lockjaw and waste away in bone-popping misery. Should I have occasion to fly before my death day—to visit an international lockjaw specialist at his mountaintop clinic, for example—metal detectors would go off and I'd have to explain the whole dumb story.

We drank some of our father's seven-ounce Miller bottles. I put ice on my eye and we watched the last half of "The Paper Chase." I decided to try again in the morning.

The next morning, the swelling had gone down a little and the hole was scabbed over. I tried squeezing it again. The BB wasn't stuck in the tough flesh anymore, but now the "entry wound" had closed over. Our parents were coming out that night and they were going to murder us. Playing with BB guns. Allowing Reggie to play with BB guns when I was in charge of the house. Each of us letting the other play with BB guns when we should have known better. Three capital offenses right there.

We didn't know what to do. It was like the good old days when we broke a lamp or put a hole in the couch and ran around each other like crazy cockroaches waiting for the Big Shoe. We prayed they'd decide at the last minute not to come out. We cleaned the house extra special; we even used Windex for the fingerprints on the fridge. Maybe that would distract them. We stuck the wad of bloody paper towels and a blood-soaked washcloth into a plastic King Kullen bag and shoved it way down in the garbage.

In the middle of the afternoon, Reggie went out to sell our gun to N.P., who bought it for fifty cents on the dollar. We rehearsed cover stories and settled on: We were running through the woods to Clive's house and I ran into a branch that was sticking out! I coulda poked my eye out! That way they could scold us for running in the woods, and leave it at that.

But they got home and never noticed. This big thing almost in my eye.

The BB guns didn't come out again that summer. The thrill was gone. Those were our first guns, a rehearsal. I'd like to say, all these years later, now that one of us is dead and another paralyzed from the waist down by actual bullets—drug-related, as the papers put it—that the game back then was innocent. But it's not true. We always fought for real. Only the nature of the fight changed. As time went on, we learned to arm ourselves in our different ways. Some of us with real guns, some of us with more ephemeral weapons—an improbable plan or some sort of formulation about how best to move through the world. An idea that would let us be. Protect us and keep us safe. But a weapon, nonetheless.

The BB is still there. Under the skin. It's good for a story, something to shock people with after I've known them for years and feel a need to surprise them with the boy I was. It's not a scar that people notice. I asked a doctor about it once, about blood poisoning over time. He shook his head. Then he shrugged. "It hasn't killed you yet," he said. ♦

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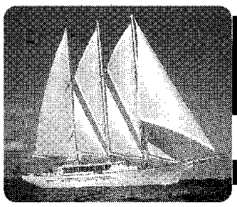

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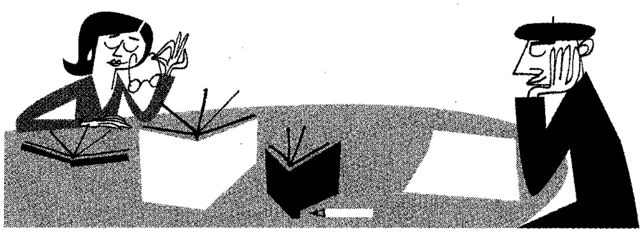


BOOKS

THE BOOK OF LISTS

Susan Sontag's early journals.

BY DARRYL PINCKNEY

For my generation of college students, arriving on campuses as American involvement in the Vietnam War was winding down, Susan Sontag was one of those culture-changing stars that the radical sixties had brought forth. She was a glamorous presence on the New York scene, an intellectual often seen and heard around town, a writer whose work many of us followed, especially her essays in *The New York Review of Books*. She was beautiful and hip, a princess of high bohemia, intimidating, free, and, incandescently, always *on*. She became even more famous after "On Photography" (1977) and "Illness as Metaphor" (1978). I don't remember when the signature white streak began to appear in her lustrous, abundant hair, but I think of her as someone who went out dressed in her fame, like a great scarf thrown over the shoulder at the last moment. And I must admit that, when we became friends, I was far too pleased to be seen with her.

Not much of Sontag's writing was autobiographical, but in 1987 she published a memoir, in this magazine, about a visit she'd made as a teen-ager to Thomas Mann in Los Angeles—her family had moved from Tucson to Los Angeles when she was thirteen—and I remember feeling that she'd kept a secret from me, because, as often as we'd talked about Mann, his brother, his son, and Alfred Döblin's jealousy of his fellow-exile, I hadn't known about the pilgrimage. The following year, when we were both living in Berlin, she asked me if I kept a journal. I asked her the same question, and she shook her head. I should not be surprised that she turned out to have kept one. After all, she worked in as many genres as she could, and a journal is often an emerging writer's first practice at expression.

Sontag's "Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947-1963" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $25), edited by her son, David Rieff, is a fascinating document of her apprenticeship, charting her earnest quest for education, identity, and voice. The volume takes us from her last days at North Hollywood High School to the year that, now living in New York, she published her first novel, "The Benefactor." Born in 1933, Sontag was barely sixteen when she went to Berkeley, from which, after one semester, she transferred to the University of Chicago. Yet she was already sounding like Susan Sontag, kingmaker, declaring, in a journal entry from 1948, that "The Magic Mountain" was "the finest novel" she'd ever read, and immersing herself in the journals of André Gide. Her voice never aged, perhaps in part because she did not lose her avidity for experience, and, of all forms of experience, reading left her at her most alert and restless.

Gide was at the height of his fame in the English-speaking world when Sontag, at the age of fifteen, stayed up late into the night reading the second volume of his journals. "Gide and I have attained such perfect intellectual communion that I experience the appropriate labor pains for every thought he gives birth to!" she wrote in an entry from 1948, a year after he was awarded the Nobel Prize. "Thus I do not think 'How marvelously lucid this is!'—but: 'Stop! I cannot think this fast! Or rather I cannot grow this fast!' " Gide's puritanism spoke to the cloistered, brilliant girl's overvaluation of self-laceration as intellectual honesty. So, too, did his unapologetic reports of his responses to literature—of sobbing on a park bench after reading about Catherine and Heathcliff's last meeting. Sontag confessed her lesbianism in some of the earliest entries, and the sense of a shared sexual heterodoxy may help explain why she believed she'd found a companion in Gide; just as he wrote about falling in love with "M." during the First World War, she was soon writing about her infatuation with "H."

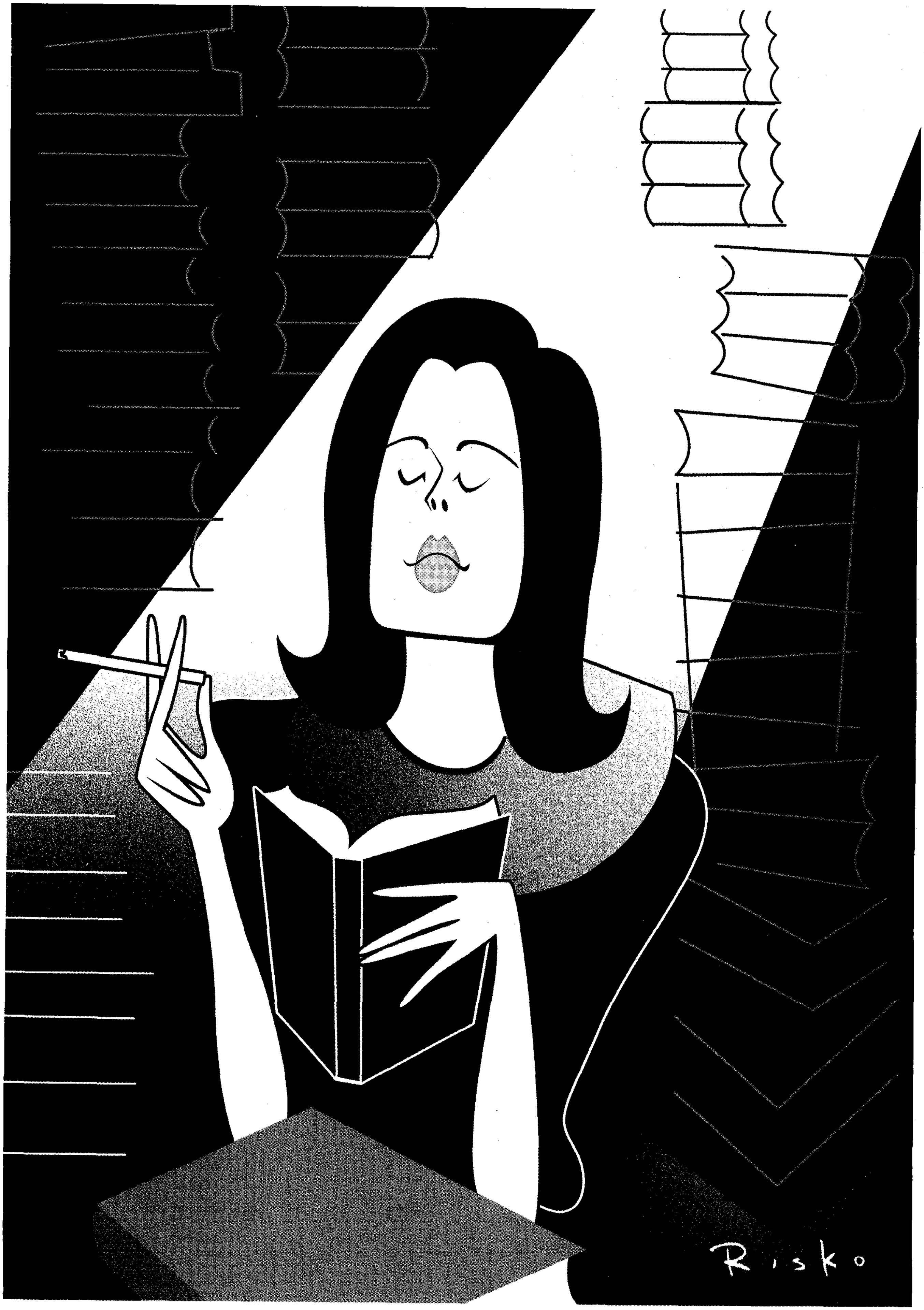
The writer's sensibility was, for her, a thing to be studied, pondered, and the questions she longed to ask of the writers she cared for seemed to hold all the answers to her future. She and two friends had their chance to interrogate Thomas Mann—"God," as she dubbed him—a few days after Christmas in 1949:

> We sat, immobilized with awe, outside his house (1550 San Remo Drive) from 5:30 to 5:55, rehearsing. His wife, slight, grey face and hair, opened the door. He at the far end of the large living room on the couch, holding a large black dog by the collar, which we'd heard barking as we had approached. Beige suit, maroon tie, white shoes—feet together, knees apart—(Bashan!)—Very controlled, undistinguished face, exactly like his photographs. He led us into his study (walls lined with book-cases, of course)—his speech is slow and precise, and his accent is much less prominent than I expected—"But—O tell us what the oracle said."

And so the youthful witness entered, determined to remember everything: what the great man said about "The Magic Mountain" as an allegory and what the character Hans Castorp represented, which translations of his work he liked best, and what he thought of Joyce and Proust.

The most extensive journal passages from Sontag's earlier years concern her sexual experiences at Berkeley and her

"Baby, sweet boy, forgive me," Sontag wrote in her journal after leaving husband and son to embark for Oxford and philosophy.



ROBERT RISKO; OPPOSITE: LENE DUE-JENSEN

exploration of gay bars on the seamy side of San Francisco in 1949:

> A opened the Tin Angel last night and H asked me to come. Until I got drunk I thought it all rather depressing—H was high right away, and spent the evening being hysterically amiable to all the women whom she'd slept with during the last year (and now loathed): they all seemed to be there.... Mary's old girl friend was, too, looking very sullen.... B and A got very drunk, naturally, and broke one of the windows. . . . I can imagine what they're saying this morning!... After a million other people, H got around to necking with me, which was, to put it mildly, lots of fun.... Then up came some creep (H had been shouting all over the room: "she's only 16—isn't that amazing? And I'm her first lover"), who wanted to "rescue" me. . . . H pushed me at him ("Have some heterosexual experience, Sue") and before I knew it we were dancing and necking.

When it came to her unfolding, complicated sexuality and her frustrated engagements of the heart—"I am reborn," she proclaimed in May of 1949—she turned to her journal as a confidant, which may account for a somewhat intermittent quality to the over-all story the journal tells. She denied that reason and passion could be at odds; the mind had to accept where the heart led, or, at least, not be a hindrance to it.

Husband and child appear suddenly. It's as though her relationship with the sociology instructor Philip Rieff, whom she met in Chicago—"the ugliest city I've ever seen: one continuous slum"—had taken place off-camera. For the entry dated December 2, 1949, we get one line: "I am engaged to Philip Rieff." A year later comes another line, somewhat ominous: "I marry Philip with full consciousness + fear of my will toward self-destructiveness." (She was not yet eighteen years old.)

In the mid-fifties, Sontag and her husband were living the anxious life of young academics in Cambridge, Massachusetts; she had entered graduate school at Harvard, studying English and then philosophy, while her husband taught at Brandeis. She was feeling "malcontented with a new fierceness." In September of 1957, "Reborn" provides a focussed narrative about a crucial episode in her life, starting with her packing up house:

> I went to the ground floor + out the back entrance on to Mass Ave. and walked home. It was now 1:00. I shut the padlock on the kitchen closet, shut my suitcases, used the toilet, then called a Harvard cab which came in three minutes with a pleasant old man driving it. It was now 1:15. I directed him down Mass Ave. (1) to stop in front of the Widener entrance so I could return a book ([John] Gay's *Plays*—Abbey edition, with the music); then (2) to the post office, where I mailed the rest of the packages, including one of old clothes to Chicago; then (3) to the Bradley offices on Brattle St., where I left a copy of the lease + the keys to the house with perspiring, disorganized Mr. Elliot; then (4) to Back Bay Station.

SANTA'S WORKSHOP
P. BYRNES.

"The 'Ho ho ho' thing—we get it. By Act II, I'm looking for it to have evolved."

This was, it seems, the last time that she and Philip would live together as husband and wife. In "Reborn," she had the most to say about her life during periods of upheaval, when taking another difficult step in the making of herself.

After leaving her husband and her child—"Baby, sweet boy, forgive me"—she embarked for Oxford and moral philosophy. She then abandoned her plans for a master's degree and, having gone to Paris on a holiday, decided to stay there. She was reunited with "H," her first lover from the Berkeley days, and she ended up escorting her discontent through the sort of hotel rooms that Baldwin said made him understand why so much of Parisian life took place in cafés. "My relationship to H baffles me," she wrote, and she went on:

> I want it to be unpremeditated, unreflective—but the shadow of her expectations about what an "affair" consists in upsets my poise, makes me fumble. She with her romantic dissatisfactions, I with my romantic needs and longing.... One unexpected gift: that she is beautiful. I had remembered her [*from SS's days at Cal*] as definitely not beautiful, rather gross and unattractive. She's anything but that. And physical beauty is enormously, almost morbidly, important to me.

These entries are made in the anguished but self-justifying mood that Gide warned his readers to distrust, noting that he seldom wrote in his journal when life was going well. After the humiliation of reading, in H's journal, a "curt, unfair, uncharitable assessment" of herself, Sontag explained why she felt no guilt at having peeked at someone else's private musings: "One of the main (social) functions of a journal or diary is precisely to be read furtively by other people, the people (like parents + lovers) about whom one has been cruelly honest only in the journal."

What slowly emerges from the unhappy, sometimes cryptic meditations of "Reborn" is a sense of Sontag's ferocious will. There are explicit references to it in moments of self-disgust ("My will is more flabby than it's ever been before") and self-coaxing ("But reason won't make me do it, only will"). No matter how wounded she was, she moved on. After rereading Gide's "The Immoralist," she decided that she had outgrown him: "The next books I want to read are the Kafka diaries." The pages of "Reborn" establish the primacy of reading in her life. ("Oh, the ecstasy of aloneness!") At a bookshop in 1953, she opened a collection of Kafka's short stories and turned to "The Metamorphosis":

> It was like a physical blow, the *absoluteness* of his prose, pure actuality nothing forced or obscure. How I admire him above all other writers! Beside him, Joyce is so stupid, Gide so—yes—sweet, Mann so hollow + bombastic. Only Proust is as interesting—almost. But Kafka has that magic of actuality in even the most dislocated phrase that no other modern has, a kind of shiver + grinding blue ache in your teeth.

In her notebooks, too, she could rehearse her self-consciousness, as in this entry from December of 1957:

> On Keeping a Journal.
>
> Superficial to understand the journal as just a receptacle for one's private, secret thoughts—like a confidante who is deaf, dumb, and illiterate. In the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could to any person; I create myself.

Once Sontag is back from Europe and settled in New York, divorced, and in custody of her son, the domestic is overheard in her notebooks from time to time. It is in her groans over another up-and-down affair with a woman, in a mother's pride in her son's precocity, and in her continued, bitter reflections on marriage: "The thought of going back to my old life—it hardly even seems like a dilemma anymore. I can't, I won't. I can say that now without strain." Several of her "Ideas for stories," jotted down now and then in "Reborn," clearly draw on her experience, but she had little use for her past. She had written, in 1957, a sort of stream-of-consciousness "Notes of a Childhood" (though she later exclaimed, in her journal, that she'd had no childhood):

> Hearing John Howard Lawson [blacklisted scriptwriter] speak. Has a limp.
>
> Grandma Lena feeding me mashed potatoes.
>
> . . .
>
> Weeping when Roosevelt died.
>
> Listening to world premiere (radio) of Shostakovich's Seventh [Symphony].
>
> . . .
>
> Giving blood for Israel. The ache in my arm.

"Reborn" is full of lists—lists of random words ("lotophagous"), of music heard, records to buy, books to buy, films seen, gay slang, Hebrew words, Hindu gods, Latin words, stories she planned in the manner of Strindberg. Some lists are cautions to herself:

> DON'T
> 1. Criticize publicly anyone at Harvard—
> 2. Allude to your age (boastfully, mock-respectfully, or otherwise)
> 3. Talk about money
> 4. Talk about Brandeis
> DO
> 1. Shower every other night
> 2. Write Mother every other day

Every list pertaining to her reading is a prescription for self-improvement. (There are surprises, such as how anti-Freudian she was early on.) "My reading is hoarding, accumulating, storing up for the future, filling the hole of the present." She seemed to remember everything she'd ever read. When she heard four-year-old David announce that he "sees Jesus on the cross" when he shuts his eyes, she decided that it was time to break out the Homer.

The Susan Sontag I came to know is most obviously presaged in the young diarist's cultural voraciousness. As she ran around Manhattan and cruised out to the Brooklyn Academy of Music, I sometimes got the feeling that she went to everything all the time as a way of staying one step ahead of her melancholy. Her appetite for culture was astonishing—the ballet, modern dance, opera, avant-garde theatre, chamber music, film, and more film. She had no chitchat and, like Edmund Wilson, she loved to instruct those on whom she lavished herself, whether they asked for it or not. She could go on for hours, and I enjoyed getting browbeaten for not having read "Ferdydurke." She was an enthusiast, and her essays, apart from one condemning Leni Riefenstahl, are appreciations, strenuously celebratory examinations. Occasionally, the A student in her could bounce her into strange judgments, as when she championed Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's scarcely endurable "Hitler: A Film from Germany," because she was thrilled to get its obscure silent-film references.

Sontag the essayist was more confident than Sontag the fiction writer. She had inspirations about how to tell a story that made up for some of the things she

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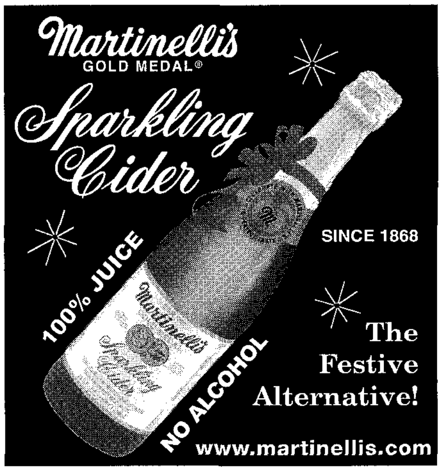
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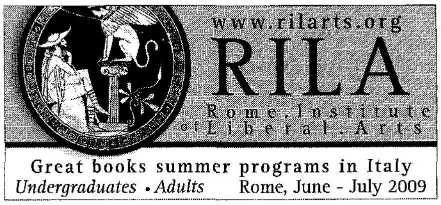
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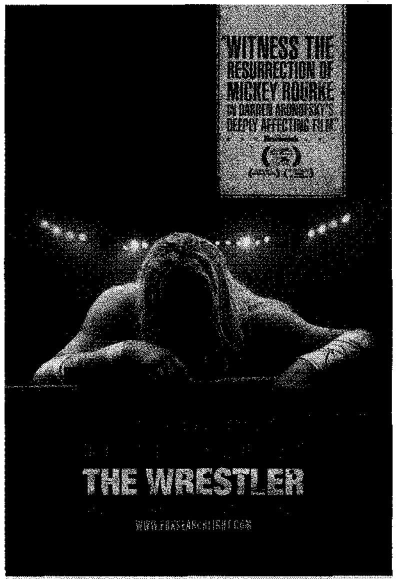
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couldn't do in fiction—such as realistic dialogue—but her humility toward the Novel arose from the fear that her prose lacked the amplitude and lyricism that her literary ambitions called for. Her discipline and her capacity for labor were remarkable, almost an accusation, and yet it was touching to hear her say that she read aloud to herself pages of "The Volcano Lover" (1992) and crossed out words and phrases, trying for the right tone, hoping to increase the velocity of her sentences, struggling to make her prose sound effortless—like Elizabeth Hardwick's "Sleepless Nights," she'd say. Her need to prove herself as a novelist turned her against the essay form for a while and put her in a rage with her own best achievements. After "In America" (1999) received a National Book Award, she felt vindicated and went back to writing essays; "Regarding the Pain of Others" (2003) is an example of her brilliance at a kind of moral inquiry that was neither academic nor merely belletristic. For Sontag, prose was not a vehicle for expressing what she thought; it was itself a form of thinking, and, perhaps more exactingly, of feeling as well.

"I don't know what my real feelings are," she wrote in 1960. "That's why I'm so interested in moral philosophy, which tells me (or at least turns me toward) what my feelings ought to be. Why worry about analyzing the crude ore, I reason, if you know how to produce the refined metal directly?" She had assumed that only the academic life could give space to her love of books. An underlying story of "Reborn" concerns her disengagement from that creed. When a Harvard professor asked her what she thought of the legal philosopher H. L. A. Hart's seminar, Sontag recounts, "I was condescendingly, politely negative: the attitude I know he takes." In "Reborn," whether she is teaching at the City College of New York or at Sarah Lawrence—and missing, yet again, one of her classes—it is clear that, as fond of her students as she could be, she doesn't want them in her head. Her way of putting forward an argument did retain an aggressiveness learned in the graduate seminar, when she declined to defer to the guys. But she wanted to be a writer, and would do almost anything to make that happen, which is why it is moving to find in her notebooks a degree of self-doubt and self-criticism not usually associated with Susan Sontag: "The mind is a whore."

In 1962, she was knocking Henry James and Proust for what she considered to be their snobbishness. The rich were not glamorous and sex wasn't dirty, she decided, and one can detect the changing social mood in such pronouncements, an impatience and a growing radicalism. "Reborn" is overwhelmingly a record of an inner landscape, and so there is little sense of the times—no mention of civil-rights demonstrations, no arguments about Cuba. Sontag barely even let her journal know that she was at work on a novel, although the effects of that undertaking are perhaps apparent in the increasingly aphoristic style of her pages. The reading lists go on: Tillich, Gibbon, G. Le Bras.

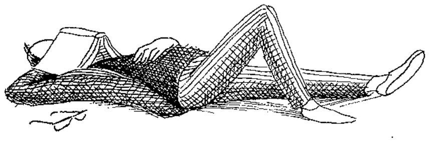
In the earliest entries, the lists included William Faulkner, Nathanael West, and Sherwood Anderson; and in the early sixties she did take note of a list of metropolitan writers (Bellow, Ellison, Grace Paley). But she soon left the Americans behind. Her literary preferences may have represented a reaction against the provincialism of a childhood spent in Arizona and Southern California. But they may also have related to a strain of American culture that was profoundly influenced by the refugees from Fascism—the artists, writers, philosophers, musicians, and composers of the Weimar generation. Then, too, she grew up as an American for whom Europe was a threatened, cutoff place, and as a romantic girl she was bound to want to see the places that she had read about.

Sontag, the mature writer, was wary of imposing social categories on literature. She had worked too hard for her place at the table with the guys to accept what she considered relegation to the ghettos—Women's Literature, Gay Literature. Something of that feeling, a refusal to let the guys corral her, may have been behind her reticence, in interviews, about her partner, Annie Leibovitz. (She once berated me when I said that I didn't mind being called an African-American writer, as opposed to a writer who was African-American.) The realm of literature, to her, was a universal community, a brotherhood of the subversive and the good. "Reborn" traces that evolving, innocent faith. An entry from 1961: "Writing is a beautiful act. It is making something that will give pleasure to others later." ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

New Lives, *by Ingo Schulze, translated from the German by John E. Woods (Knopf; $28.95).* What is the role of the artist when the world he has defined himself against disappears overnight? Schulze's colossal second novel, set just after Germany's Reunification, provides one answer to the question. Its conceit is both witty and elaborate: the Dresden-born Enrico Türmer, a dramaturge turned newspaper tycoon, goes bankrupt in the late nineties and vanishes. His boyhood acquaintance—named Ingo Schulze—decides to publish the failed entrepreneur's personal letters from the pivotal year of 1990, when he first joined the newspaper business and seemed more like a second-rate Stephen Dedalus than like a future Rupert Murdoch. Schulze resists the temptation to seduce us with the joys and betrayals of the period, as if that would be yet another form of exploitation, but the resulting epistolary jumble of memory and event is inevitably less resonant for an American audience than for a German one.

Chicago, *by Alaa al Aswany, translated from the Arabic by Farouk Abdel Wahab (Harper; $25.95).* Aswany's second novel is populated by a large, mostly Egyptian cast living in Chicago. The politics of the old country loom large. Nagi, embarking on graduate work in histology, longs to be a poet and is filled with revolutionary fire; Shaymaa, whose intelligence can't redeem her lack of a husband in the eyes of her family, is rescued from homesickness by a man but finds herself led astray by her feelings for him; Salah, a respected academic, is drawn back to a woman he once loved and to her democratic ideals. Aswany sensitively probes the nature of courage and patriotism, but his writing tends toward didacticism, and his treatment of prejudice in America lacks nuance. Even so, the story moves in surprising directions, and the ambiguity of life is well reflected in an unabashedly untidy conclusion.



The Borgias and Their Enemies, *by Christopher Hibbert (Harcourt; $26).* Lucrezia Borgia, on hearing that her father, Pope Alexander VI, was choosing her third husband, noted that her first two had been "very unlucky." Luck had little to do with it, as Hibbert shows in this vivid chronicle of the notoriously corrupt Renaissance family. One husband was killed on the orders of her brother Cesare, whose ruthlessness made him the model for Machiavelli's "The Prince"; the other was discarded after ceasing to be politically useful to the Pope. Hibbert ably traces the web of alliances through which the Spanish-born Alexander hoped to secure his hold on Italy and his family's place in power. But his prose often demonstrates the costume-drama pitfalls of popular history: too little analysis and too many "almond pastries filled with honey and nougat," which Lucrezia ate "in the steaming water of her bath or while playing idly with her countless pearls."

A Great Idea at the Time, *by Alex Beam (PublicAffairs; $24.95).* Launched in 1952 by the University of Chicago and the Encyclopædia Britannica, the Great Books was a fifty-four volume set containing four hundred and forty-three works by exclusively white, male authors of the Western world. The books caught on with a burgeoning middle class eager to acquire the intellectual cachet promised by the sets' door-to-door salesmen. Beam skillfully animates the lives of the academics involved in the venture and provides a brutally funny account of the editorial decisions about which authors to include: "Never so few fine statements set in so much crap" was the reason for one vote against Rousseau. Beam shows how the Great Books movement lives on in the core curricula of various colleges and the prominence of book clubs in contemporary America.

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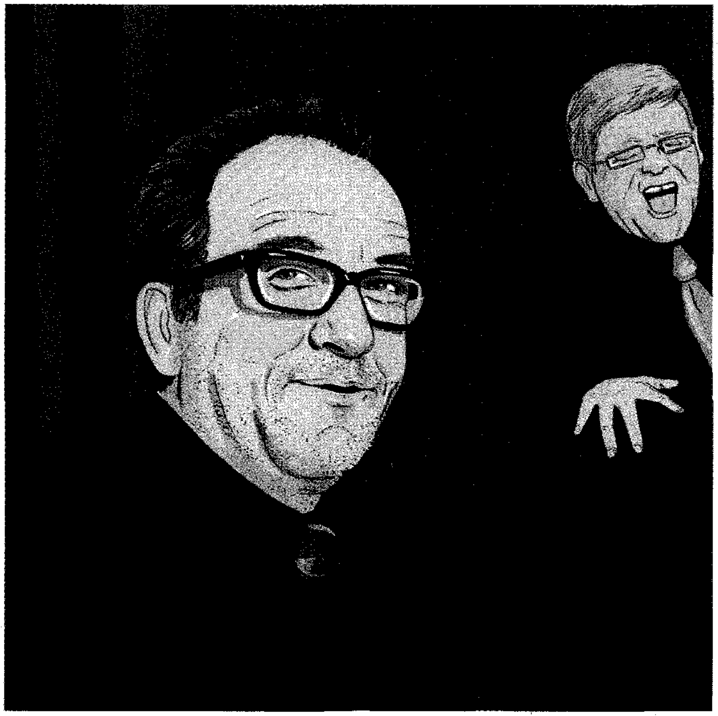
ON TELEVISION

INTIMATE PERSUASION

Talking with the stars.

BY NANCY FRANKLIN

What a funny and fun thing it is that we live in a world where Elvis Costello and William Shatner not only coexist but also have talk shows, and at the same time. It's safe to say that television host is not a hat that music fans would have predicted Costello would wear when he arrived on the scene, in the seventies; for one thing, he slammed into a career-threatening public-relations wall during a tour of the United States in 1979, when some shameful drunken trash talk that he had let loose in a bar in Ohio surfaced in the press—it was a shocking tirade about black American musicians, even more shocking in retrospect, actually, now that we know Costello's measure better. He was an angry, or, at least, prickly, fellow, with his angular posture and his acidic songs, and, for those who found him appealing, that was part of his appeal. You knew that he didn't suffer fools gladly, especially musical ones. His tight, purposeful rhythms aimed to push the soft-rock junk of the mid-seventies out of the mainstream and off the road. But the urgency of his music arose not from a true destructive impulse but from a need to burst and to flower, to take the music that was in him and get it out there fast. Music fans could see that, whatever image Costello was trying to convey as a performer, he was a lover and a student of music in a way that put him in a special category, beyond what was described by labels like "punk" and "new wave"—terms that he himself never liked, anyway. Album rapidly followed album, over the years, and it became clear that Costello wanted to try it all—he wanders freely through the fields of country, blues, jazz, classical, ska, art songs, New Orleans soul, Brill Building pop, English music hall, big band, and any other genre you've got. I haven't followed Costello down every musical pathway, but I've never been anything less than a big fan. He may be British, but his knowledge of popular-music history and his enthusiasm in sharing it make him an American national treasure.



Elvis Costello mines pop-music history on "Spectacle."

LARA TOMLIN

Costello's ear, intelligence, and musicianly generosity are all in play in "Spectacle: Elvis Costello with . . . ," his weekly one-hour show on the Sundance Channel, which is part showcase for musicians and part master class; the lineup this season includes Elton John, Rufus Wainwright, Renée Fleming, Rosanne Cash, Herbie Hancock, Tony Bennett, James Taylor, and one amateur musician, a saxophonist from Arkansas, the Artist Formerly Known as President of the United States, whose session with Costello airs this week. ("Spectacle" ends on February 25th. It would be nice if, between this season and the next—let's hope there is a next—Costello came up with a better name for the series; the current one is wrong in so many ways, "spectacle" not being remotely what the show is concerned with.)

Elton John, who is an executive producer of the show, was Costello's first guest. You may think you know Sir Elton pretty well by now—he's been on the scene for almost forty years (and if that doesn't make you feel old, then you must not be old)—but it turns out there's more to learn. That English rock musicians who grew up in the fifties absorbed American blues and jazz is a famous fact; generally less well known is what music they listened to as they got older and were performing themselves. John spoke about two artists who aren't known to many music fans—even serious ones—and spoke about them in such a way that your next stop, after you finished watching the show, was likely Amazon's music section. (Why Amazon first, and not iTunes? Because all the digital music that Amazon sells is unlocked, meaning that it can be shared limitlessly with friends. Music wants to be paid for, but, after that, it wants to be free.) Costello got John to talk about Billy Stewart, an American soul singer, who is probably best known—not that he's well known at all—for his distinctive 1966 version of the Gershwin song "Summertime." But Costello and John both knew much more of his catalogue than that, and when John sang a line from a song called "Sitting in the Park," Costello joined in, matching him note for note, in the falsetto voice that Stewart used and that John was so taken with: he called him "the most underrated R. & B. singer ever." John's affinity for Leon Russell's piano technique and Laura Nyro's unorthodox song structures isn't news, but in this relaxed format (about fifty minutes, if you remove the commercials) he and Costello were able to discuss them in some depth, and also to talk about another little-known artist, a singer-songwriter named David Ackles, who released only four albums, between 1968 and 1973; they closed the show with a melancholy song of his called "Down River."

One of the virtues of "Spectacle" is that Costello's approach demonstrates, without being didactic, how nonlinear and wildly inclusive the history of popular music is. At the beginning of the episode with Tony Bennett, Costello sings the Hank Williams song "Cold, Cold Heart," and then says to the audience, "You know, it might seem strange to preface a conversation with the finest living vocal stylist of the great American songbook by singing a Hank Williams tune, but then I always thought Hank was in the great American songbook, right there after James Van Heusen and just before Stevie Wonder in the 'W's." Costello does his artist intros in the cadences of a carnival barker shouting, "Come one, come all!" and promising delights and surprises; the surprise, in this case, is that Bennett had a big hit, in 1951, with "Cold, Cold Heart," and that it was one of the earliest covers of a country song by a standards singer. This is no surprise at all; as Costello well knows, it's a frequently noted milestone in Bennett's career, but it paved the way for Bennett to tell a funny story, one that illustrated how shotgun musical weddings can have happy endings. He had balked, he said, at recording Williams's song when it was presented to him by his producer, Mitch Miller (the most interestingly problematic of that era's record producers, responsible both for gems and for some notorious dogs), because he didn't feel that he knew how to sing it; the recording exists only because Miller, finally, insisted. " 'If we have to tie you to a tree, you're going to sing this,' " Bennett, good-humoredly, reported him as saying, and then added a twist to the story: after the record was released, Williams called Bennett and said, "Tony, what's the idea of ruining my song?"

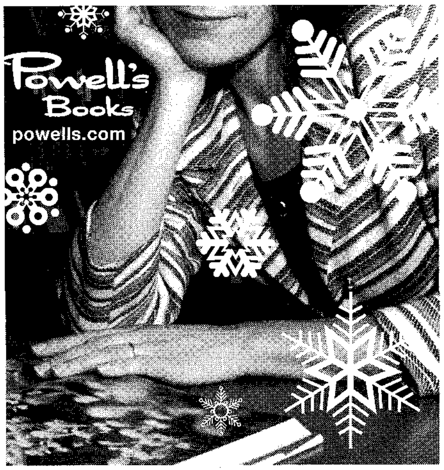
Costello refers to what he calls Bing Crosby's art of "intimate persuasion," and he, too, is a master of it, getting his guests to share the private processes that lead to what we hear in public. What I'm not crazy about is the audiences that are gathered for the show; in the first seven episodes put together, I noticed only two black faces and no young proto-rockers, just a monotonous sea of well-groomed upper-middle-class white people, smiling bland Stepford smiles, their faces warmly, lovingly lit, almost like the figures in a de La Tour painting. I longed to see a pierced eyebrow or a wrinkled shirt or a scowl—something like the one Costello wore thirty years ago.

William Shatner is, forty years after the end of the original "Star Trek," a ham that has got only more delicious with time. As much of him as there is out there—Priceline ads, the ABC series "Boston Legal" (which just finished its run last week), the public squawking about whether or not he was invited to George Takei's wedding or how he felt about being left out of the new "Star Trek" movie—is there ever enough? I think not. His half-hour interview show, "Shatner's Raw Nerve," on the BIO channel (an offshoot of A&E), could bring on Shatner fatigue, though, thanks to a guest list that is rigorously uncompelling, daring you not to yawn. Some of his guests this season are Tim Allen, Valerie Bertinelli, Kelsey Grammer, Judge Judy, Jenna Jameson, and Jimmy Kimmel. But, as it happens, Shatner's intense weirdness makes things compelling. In the first two episodes, he elicits some thoughtful comments from Tim Allen on death and on screwing up his life, and he attempts to have a worthwhile exchange with Bertinelli on the subject of sin. Unsurprisingly, beneath Shatner's persona of an egotist glorying in and making fun of his own egotism—and please, Bill, don't ever change—is a very engaging oddball. ♦

CONSTABULARY NOTES FROM ALL OVER

From the Ocean City (Md.) Coast Dispatch.

On July 16, an OCPD officer on routine patrol observed a man later identified as Donald Thomas Groves III behind the wheel of his car with the engine running, the lights and radio on and the windows down. The officer had to use smelling salts to awaken Groves, who allegedly woke up and ordered a chicken taco from the officer believing he was somewhere else.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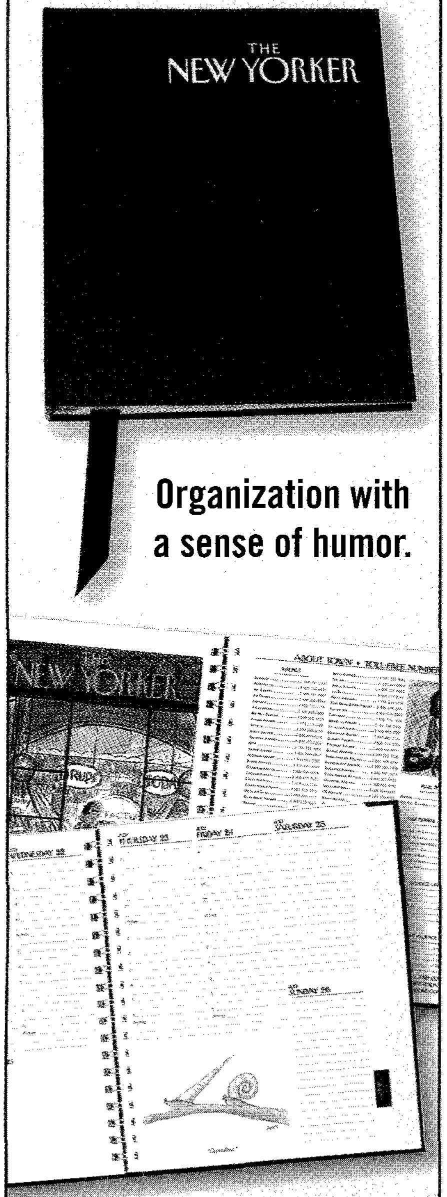

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THE ART WORLD

UNPRETTY PICTURES

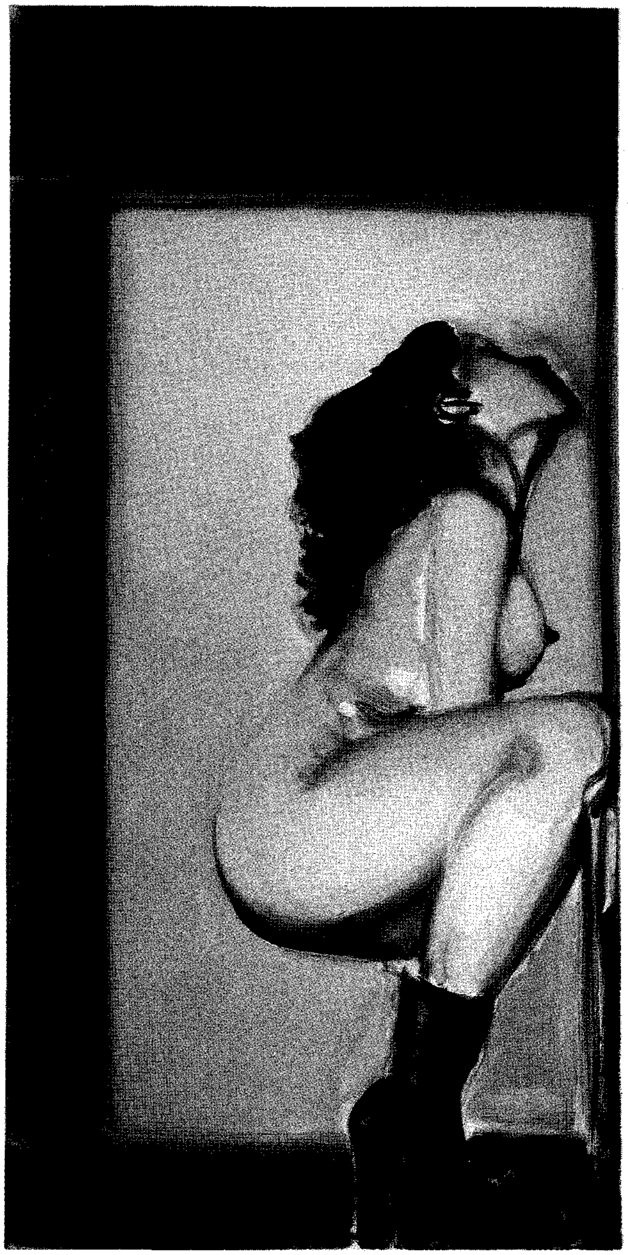
A Marlene Dumas retrospective.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

There is a heaviness to the paintings of the South African-born, Dutch-based artist Marlene Dumas, as if they might fall off the wall and break the floor. And yet they are thinly brushed, for the most part, on ordinary canvases. There's a flypaper stickiness about them, too, though their usual surface is matte and dry. The impressions are emotional. A Dumas retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, curated by Cornelia Butler, affected me slowly at first, then in a rush, overcoming a resistance I've had to Dumas's fast and loose, insouciantly ugly pictures, almost all of which are based on photographs of corpses, torture victims, terrorists (Osama bin Laden looking crafty and sensual), pornographically posed nudes, gawky children, and endless anonymous, discontented faces. Dumas, fifty-five years old, has been a star in Europe and on the art market since the mid-nineteen-eighties. She has been favored by a fashion for sensationalized moral seriousness which explains the recent prestige of Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud and of younger masters of sardonic melancholy, including Luc Tuymans, of Antwerp, and Neo Rauch, of Leipzig. Is this taste a self-flagellating compunction of the spendthrift rich? It may be a calculated bet on meaningfulness. Surely, no one would paint pictures as aggressively uningratiating as those of Dumas unless she meant them. At any rate, the MOMA show proves her to be a far more formidably creative character than a glance at her style—to appearances, an expressionistic pastiche on modish themes—would indicate.

Dumas grew up speaking Afrikaans in Kuils River, a farming town near Cape Town. Her mother was a homemaker, her father a hard-drinking winemaker who died of liver disease when Dumas was twelve. Contact with the outside world was policed by the apartheid regime. Kuils River had no television until 1976, the year that Dumas left for Holland, having graduated with a degree in fine art from the University of Cape Town. In Amsterdam, she studied at a conceptualism-fancying art institute, Ateliers '63, and supported herself by cleaning houses. As a provincial from a disreputable culture, she had trouble adjusting. With ambiguous defiance, she made a T-shirt for herself that read "Ik is een allochtoon," adopting a term for "immigrant" that is sometimes applied pejoratively to Holland's black and Muslim residents. Political sensitivity was rife in international art circles. Living in Europe's last redoubt of colonialist tyranny, Dumas both suffered because of and learned to exploit her South African identity. (Her partner, the artist Jan Andriesse, was born in Indonesia to a family that, like all other Dutch former colonists, was expelled by President Sukarno in 1957. They have one child, Helena, born in 1989.) In common with the draftsman and animator William Kentridge, another white South African of political bent, Dumas channels a direly exotic heritage of collective guilt and personally redemptive anger. She adds to it an element of truculent but breezy feminism, often expressed in her lively writing. She reasoned in 1993, "If painting is female and insanity is a female malady, then all women painters are mad and all male painters are women."

The earliest pieces in the show, in a section devoted to graphic work, feature doodlish drawings of pinup and fashion models. Rough collages, involving photographs and scribbled text, record Dumas's efforts to get with conceptualist programs—an uncongenial ordeal from which she was rescued by the resurgence of painting in the neo-expressionist early eighties. Her initial mature paintings—portraying nerve-racked women or vaguely sinister children—somewhat recall the suavely decadent symbolism of Francesco Clemente, only with considerably less polish. A self-conscious doubt attends her most dashing and spontaneous brushwork, which can seem determined to deny its own wonderful qualities. I became fascinated by the refusal of Dumas's art to let me admire it, despite passages of whiplash drawing worthy of Edvard Munch and a quakingly tender way with incidental colors (pinks, creams, turquoise). The art historian Richard Shiff's surprising comparison, in the show's catalogue, of Dumas's method with that of Willem de Kooning adds up. Like that great Dutchman, she draws in a manner opposed to drawing's descriptive function, keeping her line loose and a-crackle, in gladiatorial combat with the subjects that occasion it. In "Fingers" (1999), the hand of a nude touching herself between her legs splays to become a detached, willful, de Kooningesque cipher. The effect is extravagantly obscene and sputteringly hilarious.


In the MOMA *show: Dumas's "Leather Boots" (2000).*

© MARLENE DUMAS

The show's title, "Measuring Your Own Grave," epitomizes Dumas's punctilious inelegance. (It sounds to me like a clumsy translation from an obscure Weimar cabaret lyric.) It's also the name of a sketchy painting, from 2003, which displays a clothed female figure draped frontally over some kind of bar with her head down, legs dangling, and her arms stretched out to the sides of the canvas. The palette is black and white with slight, disproportionately dramatic tints of pinkish flesh tone in the hands—proof that the woman is alive. This is no easy assumption with Dumas, whose "The Kiss" (also 2003) riffs on Alfred Hitchcock's iconic shot of Janet Leigh dead in "Psycho," closing the eye and turning the face downward, with lips weirdly puckered against the floor. (And then there's the brand-new "Dead Marilyn," from a photograph of Marilyn Monroe's mottled, puffy face in death—a grotesque vision rendered with disconcertingly lovely touches of pink and blue.) The title and the image of the "Grave" painting grate rather than expand on each other, and neither brings anything else clearly to mind. The muddle works to strand a viewer in the here and now of the painting, which becomes the practically abstract symbol of a powerful, ungraspable intention. That's Dumas's stickiness in action. Her art rarely conveys feeling so much as excites it and then absorbs it, to the benefit of the work's authority. She doesn't give; she takes. This turns out to be a fair deal, which alerts us to our own untapped emotions. The experience of sheerly responding pleases.

Dumas matters as one of a number of now middle-age painters who dealt with the apparent dead end of painting after modernism. A central figure, for her and for others, is Gerhard Richter, whose mournful and sarcastic work in many styles communicates two things: first, the dizziness of a freedom from ideas of historical necessity in art (when you can do whatever you like, why do anything?), and, second, the humiliation of a formerly exalted art by ever more proficient photographic mediums (why muck around with paint to express yourself, when clean machines stand ready?). Like Richter, Dumas confronts the problems head on by hewing, in paint, to the arbitrary givens of a photograph; in her case, photographs that she has found or has taken herself (usually Polaroids of people close to her). "Secondhand images," she has said, can generate "firsthand emotions." Painting for her, as for others of her generation, becomes a parasitic enterprise feeding on a world that is fat with fascinating and estranging visual information. Her creative act is part tribute to that profusion, part protest, and entirely corrective: in place of how something appears, she depicts how it appears to her. Her subjects have expanded to include reproduced art works: Hans Holbein the Younger's shocking 1521 vision (which obsessed Dostoyevsky) of an exceedingly dead Jesus, Jacques Callot's laconic seventeenth-century views of hung bodies, and, strikingly, Richter's "October 18, 1977" (1988), based on photographs of the Baader-Meinhof militants. "Stern" (2004) straightforwardly renders a familiar image of the poignantly attractive Ulrike Meinhof's head, in profile, on a morgue slab, without the blurring smear of paint in Richter's version. Dumas may be gently scolding Richter on behalf of the deceased, as if to say, "Keep your style out of this." In any case, she drags the drama of a particularly haunting tragedy back to the secondhandedness of the photograph from the thirdhandedness of Richter's painting. By this and analogous uses of imagination, Dumas suggests, a life of feeling may be sustained in times that can seem engineered to crush it. ♦

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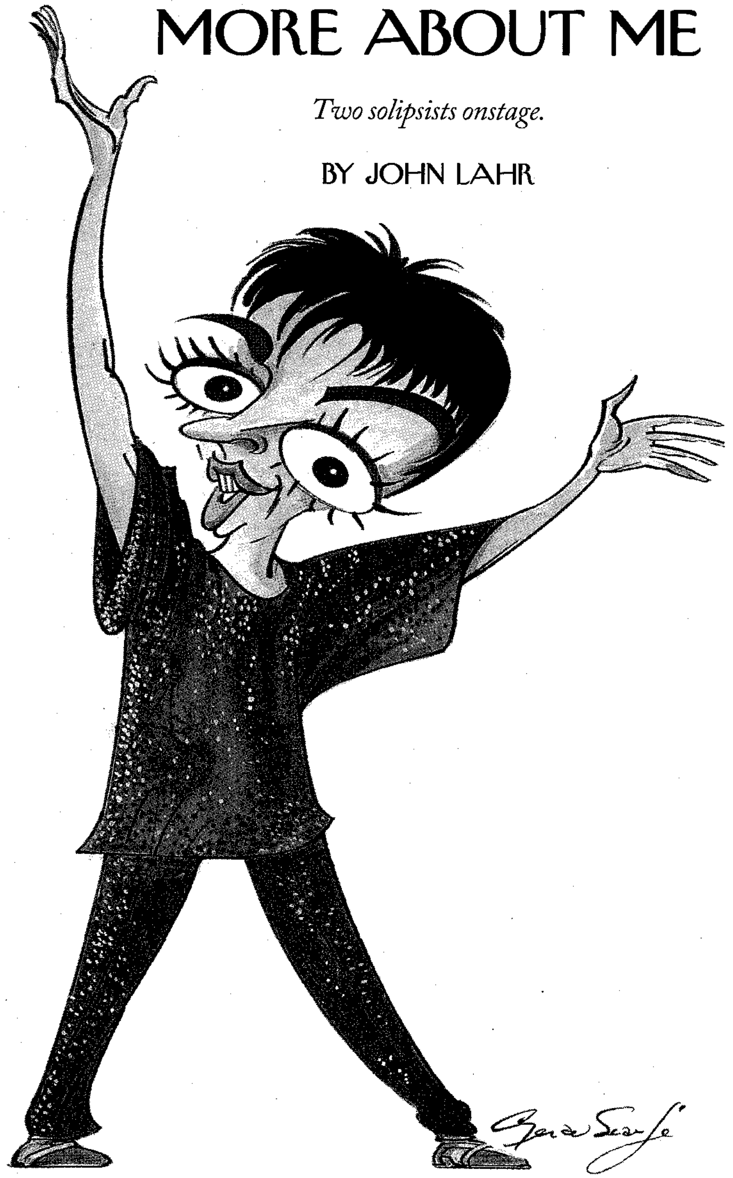
Slide show: Art work by Marlene Dumas.

THE THEATRE

MORE ABOUT ME

Two solipsists onstage.

BY JOHN LAHR



In her latest comeback, Liza Minnelli makes a spectacle of her own survival.

Liza Minnelli's new show, "Liza's at the Palace," her second comeback, begins and ends with Minnelli in a pin spot, striking her iconic triumphant pose: legs apart, right arm raised, fingers reaching to the sky. But is it a hail—or a *heil*? The show feels more like a rally than a recital. Minnelli has jazz in her voice but not in her soul. She is all chutzpah and calculation. Although she has vast amounts of energy and an overwhelming desire to please, she has, strange to say, very little sense of fun. Instead of taking you on a journey with her renditions, she continually brings you back to her, to the legend of her collapse—the divorces, the drinking, the depressions—and to her theatrical pedigree, which includes her godparents, Ira Gershwin and Kay Thompson, who more or less take care of the second act.

Under the cunning direction of Ron Lewis, and backed by a first-rate big band, Minnelli puts on a performance that is less about craft than about crowd control. She can sure whip up her fans. The day I saw the show, after each of the nineteen songs on the playlist, people in the orchestra seats jumped to their feet to cheer the diminutive dynamo. "You're fabulous!" "We love you!" voices called from the darkness. "Don't you ever, ever think that I don't know I'm up here because of you," she replied, pandering and picking their pockets at the same time. (Seats cost up to a hundred and twenty-six dollars.) In one song, written especially for the show, Minnelli promises her audience, "I would never leave you"—a truly terrifying piece of show-biz flimflammery. In fact, what she means to say is the opposite: *Please, don't leave me.*

What is it about Minnelli that audiences love? Not her voice, which is weak in the middle registers. Not her dancing or her diction, both of which are less than crisp. Most star turns make a show of perfect poise; Minnelli puts on a show of perfect discombobulation. The spectacle of survival is the thrill. Minnelli hangs on to the piano between songs like a prizefighter grabbing the ropes; she pulls a director's chair out from the wings and sings a few songs sitting down; she makes a point of loudly catching her breath, and, fetchingly, on the day I saw the show, she even asked to redo a botched stanza, because "I'm an obsessive-compulsive, and I won't sleep unless I get it right."

Minnelli reminds me of a gas fire: she looks good, she gives off a kind of heat, but she's not real. Masquerade, not meaning, is her forte. ("Oh!" she says, full of faux wonder at the set she's been singing on for a week. "Isn't it beautiful!") Her rousing trademark numbers, "Cabaret" and "New York, New York"—each of which ends an act—play to the unrelenting brightness of her surface. (The show is noticeably short on love songs; to sing them well requires some nuanced familiarity with one's inner life—apparently a bad neighborhood that Minnelli prefers to stay away from.) In "Palace Medley"—"I'm proud to play the Palace / It's like a dream come true"—Minnelli invokes a long list of great vaudeville acts, and links herself to their glorious tradition. If she is part of that tradition, she's a decadent one: in her performance, there is vitality but no joy, technique but no truth. If you stand for that, you'll stand for anything.

Minnelli is a kind of psychic imperialist, who leaves nothing but herself to the imagination. Sometimes, however, it's important to get lost in a play, to sit with uncertainty, and to struggle, like the characters, to find meaning in the hubbub. Craig Lucas's "Prayer for My Enemy" (at Playwrights Horizons, under the direction of Bartlett Sher) is a game of hide-and-seek, in which the command of Lucas's

GERALD SCARFE

writing works as a kind of unspoken promise to the audience: in this series of opaque, impressionistic moments in one family's turmoil, something will be found. The apparent "enemy" of the title is the bumbling, bombastic Austin Noone (Skipp Sudduth), a bipolar Vietnam vet, whose mania has held his family hostage for decades and seems finally to be in abeyance. "I thank God every day, I hit my knees first and last thing, for this second chance," Austin, who's in A.A. and six years sober, says. "I didn't deserve it, but . . ." The rueful voice of his daughter, Marianne (Cassie Beck), chimes in. "We did," she says.

Two currents run simultaneously through the play: the smooth surface of banality and the roiling undertow of resentment. The script shifts continually between internal monologue (italicized) and naturalistic exchange—a stutter-step idiom that mimics the sense of spiritual dislocation Lucas wants to convey. He is trying to dramatize our psychic static, the perpetual, noodling back-and-forth between the conscious and the unconscious mind. Each hastily sketched character bears the scars of Austin's emotional terrorism: his Iraq-bound son, Billy (Jonathan Groff), who has a sexual-identity problem ("*He started calling me 'Missy,' my father, 'Missy,' 'Fagboy,' didn't matter how many girls I brought home*"); the sour Marianne, who is divorced and has an autistic child ("*Don't listen to him, he's an asshole*," she says at Austin's first entrance. "*He'll keep you nailed to this spot for hours and then when you think you've been really nice about it he'll tell you what is wrong with every choice you've ever made*"); and his long-suffering wife, Karen (Michele Pawk), who puts a good face on everything, even her son's enlistment. When Billy brings his old friend and first love, Tad (Zachary Booth), home for a farewell barbecue, Austin can't help injecting himself into a conversation between Tad and Marianne about her son:

AUSTIN: He's in a home.
MARIANNE: You wanna just speak for me?
AUSTIN: Well, he was wondering, I'm sure.
MARIANNE: Were you?
AUSTIN: Yes, he was. *I'm sorry, I'm a lunk, a lughead, things just come marching out of my mouth, I can't stop them*—Autistic.
TAD: Yeah?

At one point, while watching a TV show on naked mole rats, Austin observes, "Their whole life is lived underground. Look how cute." Lucas's tense, terse dialogue is a similar demonstration of subterranean retreat; the Noones bury their feelings in order to preserve their family. And there's nothing cute about it. Coexistence is bought at the price of intimacy. When nothing can be spoken, no one can be known. The family has undergone some sort of mutation. They are fidgety, adrift, uncomfortable in themselves, trying to find a place in the world to settle.

Into this dark weave of murky feelings, Lucas introduces the brighter narrative thread of Dolores (Victoria Clark), who chirpily recounts her devotion to her dying mother, her love of the countryside, and her annoyance with her fiancé, who wants to put Mom in a home. "I'm the only one now," she says. "My sister is way upstate in her—not ashram, silent order: Nuns, Buddhist nuns in Albany, New York, that's like having, I don't know, Kurdish rebels in—Cleveland." She cracks herself up with her own joke, and her high-pitched laugh goes on for a long time. If I got to choose, I'd want Victoria Clark on my team. At once delicate, alert, decent, and impish, she is an astute player, who makes an instant connection with the audience. Dolores's story meets Austin's at night on a back road. She is returning from the hospital after visiting her mother; he is on a crazed, tailgating, horn-honking jag, having fallen off the wagon when the Yankees lost the playoffs—a loss that seems to stand in for all the other losses of his sad life. The encounter between the characters ends with Austin in a coma, from which he never recovers. At the funeral, Billy reads a prayer that Austin had written for the Iraqi "citizen, soldier and insurgent" (praying for one's enemies is an A.A. technique): "May he never come to make or inhabit a land so indecent as the one that lives in me." News of Austin's sense of shame comes as a shock. Lucas understands this personal tragedy; from all the painful ambivalence on show, he somehow manages to engineer a sense of gratitude for such a tormented and tormenting life. "Prayer for My Enemy" ends with an elegiac hymn to devotion, but the play, it seems to me, dramatizes a far less comforting thought, one that Austin articulates from his coma. "*Hell is truth seen too late*," he says. ♦

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John Lahr's top ten plays of 2008.

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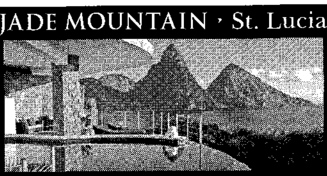
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THE CURRENT CINEMA

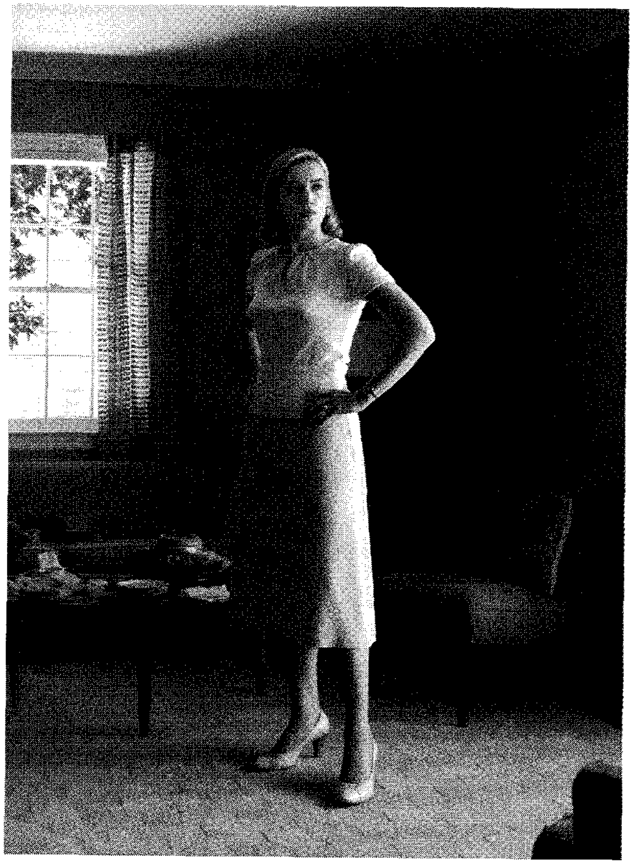
A BETTER LIFE

"Revolutionary Road," "Gran Torino," and "The Class."

BY DAVID DENBY

It has become clearer than ever that the movie year is divided into two parts. There's the first nine months, which are filled, it seems, with big-audience digital spectacles about men who fly, animated movies about indignant handheld devices and chatty rodents, and all-male comedies about virgins lost in a condom factory. And then there's the Oscar-focussed final three months of the year, which are devoted to movies about failure, abjection, death, and the Holocaust, most of them starring Kate Winslet or Cate Blanchett. "Revolutionary Road," from the celebrated Richard Yates novel of 1961, is one of the latter. It is honorably and brutally unnerving. Yet it may suffer, as only an awards-season movie can, from the illusion that pain and art are the same thing.

The movie is set a half century ago—not in the actual nineteen-fifties but in the semi-mythical fifties of John Cheever, Sloan Wilson, and many other writers as well as Yates, a time in which the orderly bedroom communities of New York and Connecticut were mourned as the national emblem of disillusionment and spiritual decline. Sam Mendes, adapting Yates's book with the English screenwriter and novelist Justin Haythe, has been in this suburban wasteland before, in 1999, with "American Beauty." That movie was all stylized red and black surfaces. This time, Mendes pushes the signature look of the fifties: commuters in identical gray suits and hats pour like lava through Grand Central Terminal and settle to work in vast open floors with shaded glass partitions. Cigarettes are lit and furiously smoked before, during, and after conversation; Martinis, consumed by the bucketful, launch anxious bouts of adultery and heartrending quarrels. The movie's central male figure is Frank Wheeler (Leonardo DiCaprio), a handsome young office worker with neatly combed light-brown hair and crisp white shirts. Several years earlier, at a party, Frank had spied a girl named April (Kate Winslet), a stunner with a long back and golden tresses; the hungry way they looked each other over on that occasion is meant to summarize for us the hopefulness and the erotic splendor of their early years together. The movie, like the novel, picks up with them in 1955, when they are living in a small, agreeable house in Connecticut, with their two children. April, who wanted to be an actress, has failed in that ambition, and Frank is lazily and contemptuously working for the same business-machine manufacturer in Manhattan that his father had worked for. At the same time, the Wheelers, in revolt against the suburbs, against conformity, against playing it safe, believe that they are marked for some extraordinary destiny. Somehow, they will escape. As a couple, they are the American descendants of Henry James's melancholy Londoner John Marcher, from the novella "The Beast in the Jungle," a man who spends years preparing for the special fate that he's sure will spring at him from the wilds of life.



Kate Winslet on the set. Photograph by Brigitte Lacombe.

The movie is driven, however, not by the hope of liberation but by a tense, looming sense of disaster, and part of our fascinated but fearful response to it is created by the sense that April and Frank are never at ease with each other. In the past, Winslet has played American women without straining, but this time she enunciates with laborious precision—you can see her propelling vowels and consonants like smoke rings. She and Mendes (her offscreen husband) have worked out a conception of April as a will-driven, semi-hysterical female defined solely by her relationship with Frank. Forcing herself to extremes, April is either electrified by her husband ("You're the most beautiful thing in the world—a man") or disgusted by him; she will turn him into a god or destroy him, and Winslet keeps her back rigid, her shoulders high, her jaw set. DiCaprio, by turns cocky, supplicating, and enraged, gets the externals right, but he seems a little afraid of revealing the depths of Frank's shallowness. Frank is a liar, an adulterer, and a compromiser who betrays himself as much as his wife, but DiCaprio projects a natural heroic sweetness—it's in his movie-star genes—which, in this case, is at odds with the character he's playing. If you think of Paul Newman's acid moments in "The Hustler" and "Hud," you can imagine how the role might have been done.

Henry James's antihero discovers his fate: he is to be "the man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened," an ironic catastrophe. Marcher suffers from an insufficiency of sexuality, of vital spirit, which is hardly the Wheelers' problem, but, like him, they have no idea what to do with themselves. Now, the Wheelers' dilemma is grounds for pathos, or possibly, turned a different way, for satire, but is it grounds for tragedy? The story works toward a gruesomely unhappy ending, but I can't escape the feeling that both creator and re-creator have trapped an American couple in a grim, overly mechanistic system of dead ends that reflects the artists' own ambitions and temperaments rather than some stinging truth about American incapacity. There's a sourness, a relentlessness about the movie which borders on misanthropy. In both the social and the personal scenes, the conversational tone veers between idiotic pleasantries and fathomless bile, with nothing in between. Were middle-class people in the fifties really so stunted? The only character who consistently speaks with intelligence turns out to be not only crazy but destructive. (He's played, in a brilliant virtuoso turn, by the scary-looking Michael Shannon.) By schematizing the book's relationships and by cutting away Yates's extraordinary precision, psychological nuance, and eloquent sorrows, Mendes has, I think, unwittingly revealed something unconvincing about the material.

Just two years after Yates's book came out, Betty Friedan published "The Feminine Mystique," whose resonant starting point is the puzzling misery felt by suburban housewives like April—women allegedly living the American Dream, complete with wage-earning husband, multiple children, and good china. It would be inane to fault Richard Yates for not possessing an explicitly feminist consciousness, but he never suggests that April suffers from even the slightest social constriction, and neither does Mendes. April is isolated in her own neuroses, and Winslet goes all the way into the kind of strident rage that is fuelled by excess; DiCaprio, once baited, stays with her. In scene after scene, the two actors tear away at each other, sometimes in tight closeup. Mendes is a man of the theatre, and this movie, I suppose, is like a strong Broadway drama—clenched, explosive, and, perhaps, cathartic. But I don't think the turmoil of "Revolutionary Road" should be confused with movie art.

In "Gran Torino," Clint Eastwood appears (symbolically) as the last white man in America, guarding what might be called the last American car—an Army-green 1972 Ford Gran Torino, lovingly preserved in a garage in run-down Highland Park, just outside Detroit. The movie, directed by Eastwood and written by Nick Schenk, is set in the present, when a Korean War hero and longtime Ford automotive worker, Walt Kowalski (Eastwood), now a retired father of two grown sons, his wife recently dead, finds himself living next door to Hmong immigrants, whom he towers over and bullies. The Hmong are the hill people of Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam who fought on the American side in Vietnam; some of them immigrated to the United States, and they work hard, but Walt calls them "gooks" and "slopes" and other bitterly pronounced tags from the rich American vocabulary of abuse. When young Thao (Bee Vang), from next door, tries to steal the sacred Gran Torino, Walt becomes enmeshed with the boy's family, first as antagonist and then, gradually, as fierce protector—so fierce that he gets caught up in the neighborhood gang wars, with their escalating back-and-forth of beatings, rapes, and shoot-outs.

Walt is meant to be the kind of fearless American whose strength is inseparable from his blighted vision of the world. He is obsessed with turf, with right and wrong narrowly defined, with male codes, male lingo. The movie was not written for Eastwood, but it still seems to be all about him—his past characters, his myth, his old role as a dispenser of raw justice. Growling and muttering, Eastwood appears to be offering a satirical critique: this hoarse-voiced, glaring, absurdly nasty old man is what Dirty Harry might have become. The movie, which Eastwood directed with his usual vigor, has plenty of violent scenes, but it's mostly a rueful comedy of enlightenment: by degrees, Walt comes to admire his neighbors; he

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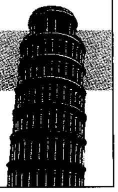
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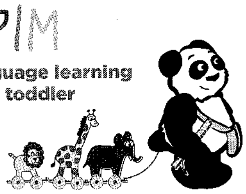
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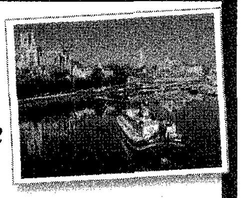

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realizes that he has more in common with their quiet self-discipline than with the hollow consumerism of his sons and their grasping kids. Walt's final acts in the neighborhood struggles come as a shock, but, in retrospect, they make perfect sense as Eastwood's personal renunciation of vengeance and also as a kind of down payment on an altered American future.

The day-to-day difficulties and occasional exhilarations of urban multi-ethnic education have never been dramatized with half the power or the humor that the director Laurent Cantet ("Time Out") brings to them in "The Class." The movie, which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes this year, stars an actual teacher, François Bégaudeau, who, in 2006, published a book chronicling a year in the Paris public school where he teaches French. Cantet and Bégaudeau, along with Robin Campillo, condensed and reshaped the material into a two-hour drama centering on the teacher and a small number of middle-school students (all played by real students, though not the same ones Bégaudeau wrote about). Bégaudeau, in his thirties, is handsome, lean, and quick, with a strong voice; the slouching or rowdy kids are mostly of African or Caribbean descent—though many of them were born in France, they are still outsiders, and rightfully touchy about it. Some of them are resistant to education, which disrupts the pleasures of adolescence, but Bégaudeau goes after them aggressively, challenging, correcting, teasing, criticizing, and they are alive to him and come back hard.

Bégaudeau, a brave and candid man, dramatizes his own failures, as when he offhandedly compares some insolent girls to "skanks" and nearly starts a rebellion. He finds himself in the contradictory position of liberal authority: he demands that the students not mope around in a recessive funk and instead become their authentic selves. But then, empowered by his attention, they challenge his control of the class. The climax of the movie is a wrenching episode in which a boy from Mali throws a tantrum, and the school, given its self-defining rules, has to decide whether to expel him, even though expulsion will probably send him back to Africa. In all, "The Class" is a prime document of French post-colonial blues, though its relevance to American urban education could not be any greater if it had been made in the Bronx or Trenton or South Los Angeles. I would be surprised if this brilliant and touching film didn't become required viewing for teachers all over the United States. Everyone else should see it as well—it's a wonderful movie. ♦

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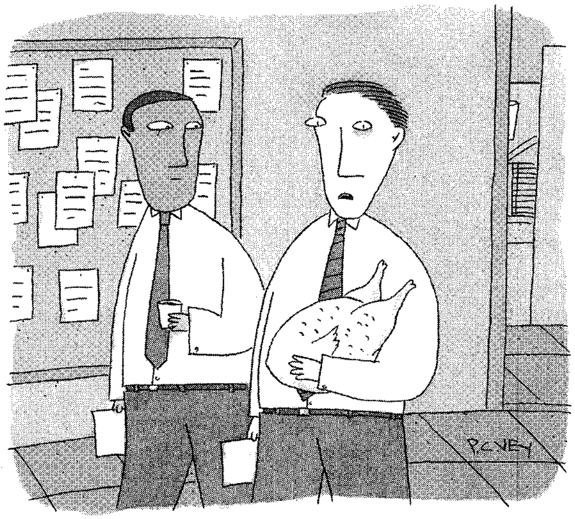
QANTAS

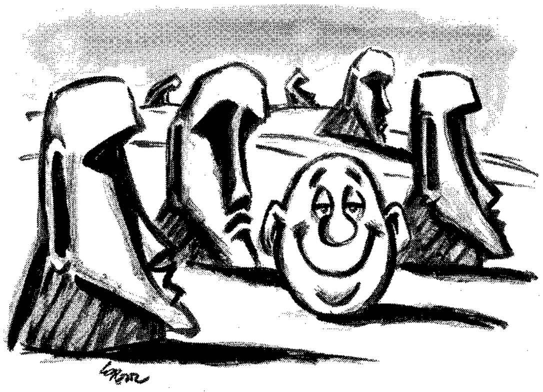
CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Harry Bliss, must be received by Sunday, December 28th. Finalists in the December 8th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 12th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"I miss the cash bonuses."
Robert Becker, Northford, Conn.



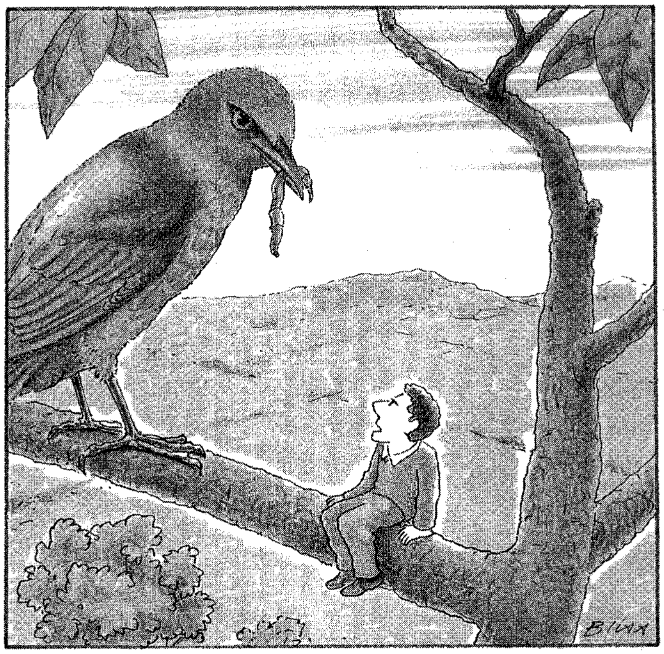
THE FINALISTS

"We really need to revisit our immigration policy."
Robert Marinai, Oakland, Calif.

"Ah, the innocence of youth."
Steve Rappaport, Brooklyn, N.Y.

"Guess who's getting voted off the island."
Michael Vorenberg, Barrington, R.I.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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